

THRILLING — NO. 23 • FEBRUARY 1972 • 60¢ U.K. "25P"

SCIENCE FICTION

75¢ IN CANADA

LET FREEDOM RING
by Fritz Leiber

INVADERS FROM THE VOID
by Russell Branch

THE WORLD OF WHISPERING WINGS • by Rog Phillips
THE DAY THE BOMB FELL • by Leslie A. Crouth
NO MEDAL FOR CAPTAIN MANNING • by William P. McGivern



Julian S. Kuyper

See

INVADERS FROM THE VOID

EXCITING STORIES IN STRANGE WORLDS

THRILLING FEBRUARY
NO. 23 • 1972
SCIENCE FICTION



- 4** **LET FREEDOM RING**
by Fritz Leiber
- 49** **THE WORLD OF WHISPERING WINGS**
by Rog Phillips
- 80** **NO MEDAL FOR CAPTAIN MANNING**
by William P. Mc Givern
- 90** **THE DAY THE BOMB FELL**
by Leslie A. Croutch
- 97** **INVADERS FROM THE VOID**
by Russell Branch

THRILLING SCIENCE FICTION is published bi-monthly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Box 7, Oakland Garden, Flushing, N.Y. 11364 at 60¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) U.S. and possessions: \$3.00; Canada and Pan American Union Countries: \$3.50; all other countries: \$4.00.; Copyright 1971 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Copyrighted 1950, 1951, 1952, by Ziff-Davis Publishing Co. All rights reserved.

LET FREEDOM RING

Under the World Director, peace had been brought to all nations. But to keep harmony men had to be drafted—to die! . . .



By Fritz Leiber, Jr.



JUST INSIDE the weatherdome Normsi stripped off his flying togs and hung them on the family rack. He noticed Allisoun's and her brother Willisoun's, his father's and mother's, and his own walking togs.

Outside it was chilly winter with a low red sun, but under the intangible hemisphere of the weatherdome the atoms were domesticated. Here was light, heat, life-giving radiation. The warm, moist air moved in gentle currents—a little kept leaking from the lee side of the dome, to condense into white vapor and whirl away.

Flowers bloomed, buds opened, grass pushed up. Here was perpetual spring.

Norm's world was like the weatherdome. He was a healthy, well-educated, uninjured young man, had an attractive job as a teletaction technician, looked forward to an early marriage with the girl he loved.

A world economy of abundance supplied him with conveniences, luxuries,

and recreations almost beyond the dreams of earlier ages.

A single government had ruled the world for two centuries. There had been no civil war for more than a hundred years.

The exploration of the nearer planets had brought to light no intelligent or dangerous nonintelligent enemies of mankind. Indeed, the opening up of Mars and Venus had proved rather anticlimactic, since their harsh environments prevented easy colonization and Earth's synthetics-based self-sufficiency took the urgency from the search for new sources of mineral and organic wealth. The new planets would serve chiefly as stations for cosmological research, until gradual scientific exploration of their life-patterns opened yet unseen vistas.

Nor was Norm's body the uneasy prey of disease germs and degenerative processes. He had far better than a 99 percent chance of escaping such dangers as long as he lived.

Yet, standing there in the garden beside the togsrack, Norm did not look like that fortunate man. If his eyes had been closed, his face would have registered as young, fresh, healthy. But with them open, the fear of death infected every feature.

He delayed near the togsrack, running his hand through his close-cropped hair, smoothing his pyjama neckband, where a line of red recalled the necktie of ancient times.

With a sudden headshake, he started up the path toward the house. Halfway there his eye strayed to the grass. He pushed at a weed with the toe of his mocassin, remained staring at the tiny green world at his feet.

Even the vastest weatherdome has its outside, its region of storms and darkness and the unknown.

AN ANT struggled up one of the grassblades. Without thinking he

set his foot on it, then drew back, wincing as though he had glimpsed something particularly unpleasant, and hurried on to the house. As the door opened, he readied his lips of a grin of relief.

But the grin never came. He stopped, and surveyed his family circle.

His mother, plumped down on the pneumatic blob of couch, had what he called her hurt look.

His father, sitting beside her, stared straight ahead. His mouth was pursed in a way that might have seemed grim in a bigger man.

Allisoun, sprawled on the resilient floor where it tilted up to merge with the wall at the other end of the room, looked doped. Her face was white, her eyelids red.

Willisoun, near her, studied Norm queerly. His fingers played with a cut flower, unrolling the petals, occasionally tugging one out.

Norm went over to the teletaction panel and plucked from the slot the newly engraved golden card bearing his death notice.

He studied the neat print. "You, Normsi," (There followed his citizenship number) "have been singled out by lot for a service of the highest honor that a citizen can render his world. You will. . . ."

He heard an inane voice say, "Oh well, somebody has to get them," and realized that it was his own.

At that his mother reacted. She was on her feet and talking in a hoarsely agonized way, as if she'd been going on for half an hour, "You don't know what you're saying, Norm! It's horrible! Horrible! Don't you realize that you'll be. . . ."

"....solely for the good of humanity, of course, and to avert far worse destruction. . . ." his father put in hurriedly, apologetically.

"...Destroyed! Destroyed!" It was Allisoun who sobbed out the words, throwing her arms around him.

He looked at them warily—his mother gripping his arm, demanding attention, his father peering over her shoulder, Allisoun's soft hair pushed against his cheek, Willisoun keeping his distance.

He heard the inane voice say, "Oh well, that's war for you. Can't be helped."

"Don't say it!" his mother implored. "Oh Norm, I can't bear to think of them taking you away. Why should it have to happen to us?"

His father was staring at the far wall, working his lips. "...And when he's so young, just starting life..." He muttered the words, as if accusing someone invisible.

"Don't let them, Norm," Allisoun sobbed into his neck.

"There's nothing you can do about it," the inane voice observed. He was beginning to hate its very sound.

His mother stood back. There were tears running down her cheeks.

"I won't let them take you," she said.

For a moment the others just looked at her. Then they caught fire from her spark.

"We'll fight them!" chimed his father, clenching his little fists and grinning spasmodically as he always did when he said anything in the least violent.

"Can't be done—" But the inane voice was swallowed up in a confused chorus of "We'll find ways," "You're ours, and we don't care what they do to us," and "Yes, by Man, we'll fight them!"

Allisoun said nothing, but she kept nodding her head against his chin and clung to him like death.

Willisoun dropped the half-stripped flower and shuffled up. "I've got influence," he said uneasily. "I'll see

you get out. I won't let you down."

SUDDENLY THE voices all stopped. In the silence Norm looked around. It occurred to him that they were waiting for him to say something. He looked around again. The faces wavered a little, but the look of anxious expectation stayed in the eyes. There was something embarrassing about that look.

"All right," he said quietly. "The worst they can do is kill me in disgrace instead of honor. I won't let them take me."

For a moment the significance of the dropped jaws, the raised eyebrows, didn't dawn on him. Even when Allisoun recoiled from him, lifting her tear-smear'd disconcerted face.

Then it hit him.

His jaw tightened.

It was almost amusing to see the hasty, aggrieved way they began to backtrack, once he had called their bluff. His father began it.

"Now Norm, I wouldn't do anything rash. We're all for you, my boy, of course, but there are so many things that have to be considered. It's terrible, I know, but the government has reasons for doing this thing—reasons which it's hard for a single individual to understand."

"Reasons for killing me?"

"Oh it's ghastly when you put it that way, of course. But—did you hear Director M'Caslrai this afternoon?"

"No."

"You should have. He stressed that they were taking this step only with the greatest reluctance, after exploring every conceivable alternative. He emphasized that this time we'd managed to avoid war for 35 years, longer than ever before—in itself a notable accomplishment. But he pointed out that we dared not frustrate the mounting

death-wish of mankind any longer. That death-wish is the realest thing in the world, Norm. It's the same guilt-urge that led thousands to confess to hideous crimes they never committed in the ancient witchcraft trials and political purges. It's the same hate-urge that piled pyramids of skulls before conquered cities and hills of human ashes before conquered countries. It's the thing that caused all past two-sided wars, with their messiness and inefficiency and their horrible unpredictability—their tendency to leap all bounds and engulf everyone. That inexorable death-wish, clearly indicated by the rocketing suicide and murder rates and a thousand other statistics, would inevitably break out in revolution or collective bestiality and probably, considering our degree of technical advancement, destroy all mankind—unless (as we have done successfully before—that's the big point!) *unless we declared war.*"

"And he mentioned the religious side," his mother broke in, using what he called her hushed voice. "He said—" She choked a little but continued bravely, "—that Man the Hero must sacrifice himself to Man the Devil in order that Man the God may be able to go on."

"Oh that rot!"

She stepped back. Norm's father put his arm around her.

"I know what you're feeling, Norm," he said. "I was through it all myself, last time, and—"

"Were you picked?" Norm's voice was like a thrown rock.

"No, of course not—"

"Then you don't understand anything." He whirled on Willisoun. "I suppose they missed you too. Yes, of course they would. Bureaucracy darling." As Willisoun bristled, Norm turned back to his parents.

"Let's get this straight now. Do you

mean to tell me that you're willing to see my life snuffed out by war? Yes, Mother, I realize it's an intensely painful subject, but what I want to know is this: Do you think it's all right to kill fifty million people in order to save five billion from some possible greater injury? Don't look at me that way, Mother! I know I'm being crude and unkind, but it's the way I feel."

SHE LIFTED her head. Her lips trembled, but her voice was almost imploringly sweet as she said, "I know that no son of mine will do anything that will bring disgrace on himself and his family."

Her husband's arm tightened around her protectively, and the little man said, "Don't you see, Norm, you wouldn't be asked to do this unless it were absolutely necessary? Do you imagine I'd stand by without protesting if I thought it were? But the collective death-wish is a terrible thing and, as M'Caslrai kept hammering home, we've got to be realistic about it. We can only hold it in check by great sacrifices. For two hundred years we've been making those sacrifices. When absolutely necessary, we've declared war. But if we ever stopped..."

Norm snorted. "Do you believe everything M'Caslrai shoves down your throat? Can't you see that war is an inhuman device, a confession of failure, a throwback to the dirtiest superstitions? Men have been sacrificed before now to jealous gods and bloodhungry demons. Ever since history began, scapegoats have been selected and stoned. I wouldn't mind war against a tangible enemy—"

"What!" his mother interrupted. "Why, that would be horrible. To go out with hate in your heart and *kill* other people..."

"I can think of some cases in which it would be eminently worthwhile," said Norm harshly. "At least I'd get a

run for my money. But this business of donating my body as a safety valve for man's destructive impulses—"

"But only to prevent worse destruction," his father cut in, his face contorted monkeywise in his eagerness to assuage. "It's only because any alternative would be far worse, that you're being called upon. It's to save people like your mother and Allisoun from indescribable horrors. I'm sure Norm, that if you could see it in that light, you'd be only too willing—"

"To die? In order to preserve the present unholy set-up that fattens on these sacrifices? To keep fossils like M'Caslrai in their present position? For that's all it really comes down to—a conspiracy against the young men so they won't upset the old men's applecart."

"Now you're talking like you used to when you went with that radical crowd." His mother looked aggrieved. Then, shrewdly, "You talk that way about M'Caslrai because deep in your heart you look up to him. He's a great man. You wouldn't listen to him this afternoon because you were afraid he'd persuade you. And now you say anything nasty about him that comes into your head."

Her husband patted her arm. "We all said some foolish things in the peace days, Gret," he reminded her. "We weren't realistic. Lord, I wish we could still afford illusions. I'm sure you'd feel very differently, Norm, if only you'd seen the sincerity and suffering in M'Caslrai's face, this afternoon." The little man's voice was placating, almost cheerful. His nervous smile had come back. Norm understood plainly: His father, always hating rows, figured that this one was over and the "smoothing out" time (his specialty) had arrived.

Norm watched him scamper spryly to the teletaction panel, heard him say, "Tell you what, they're retele-

tacting M'Caslrai's address. You'll listen to it—eh, Norm?"

Feeling sick at his stomach, he hurried out of the room.

WHEN HE reached his bedroom he uncovered his ears, and was relieved to hear only an unintelligible sibilance of whispered conversation coming from the living room—none of those detestable, friendly, understanding, solemn mouthings of M'Caslrai.

It wasn't true, what his mother had said, he assured himself angrily. The World Director had no emotional hold on him. It was just that the man was such a boring, sanctimonious old hypocrite!

He repeated this to himself more than once as he stared at the blank bedroom wall.

The resilient floor was noiseless. He only became aware of Allisoun's presence a moment before her hand touched his shoulder. He let it stay there.

The room was dark except for a fan of dim light coming through the door and the ghostly glow outlining the furniture. The voices conferring out in the living room were muted to an unintelligible drone. It felt warm and stuffy and nauseous with flower-odors, like a funeral—the sweet stink of the weatherdome.

"Norm," said Allisoun softly, "you know how it is with those who go to war—"

"Yes?"

"They let them have whatever they want. Give them any pleasure they desire."

"Well?"

"I was thinking that...well, you and I could be together, and sooner than we thought. We could do things and enjoy things that wouldn't be possible under other circumstances. We could—"

He turned around. The soft silhouetting light made her hair a bronze aureole around the darkness of face. Her shoulders stood out whitely above her black slip.

"You'd like that, eh?" he asked.

Her "yes" was almost inaudible.

"You'd really like it?"

She nodded. "And afterwards... there'd be your son."

He surveyed her for a long moment. Then he reached for the white shoulders.

As suddenly he pushed her back, held her at arm's length.

"So you'd like to be a hero's wife, eh?" he said loudly. "You'd get a thrill out of making love to a dead man? You'd like to be in on the orgies? You'd like to be one of the flower-decked concubines of the petted one who next year will have his heart torn out on a primeval God's stone altar? You'd like to count the remaining moments gloatingly? You'd like to hear a dead man's son for the next general blood-letting? Well, *I wouldn't* like it."

Willisoun stumbled into the room. "Look here," he blatted, snatching at Norm, "You can't talk to my sister that way."

"Oh yes I can." He shoved Willisoun against the bed and walked back into the living room. By the time Willisoun had followed him out, he was standing with his back to the outer door. He stopped Willisoun with a gesture and looked around—at his father with upraised hands fluttering the air, his mother slumped on the couch like a sick cow, Allisoun in the shadow of the opposite doorway, her brother a little ahead of her, face flushed and hands clenched.

"I'll say my say and then get out," Norm told them.

"Maybe I'm doing the wrong thing. Maybe I'm just showing myself up as selfish and ignorant. I know that there

are times when the few must perish for the sake of the many. I know there are a lot of things we don't understand, especially about human nature. Maybe I ought to let myself be destroyed gladly. Maybe war is the greatest social invention since Brotherly Love. Maybe it's magnificent long-range thinking and M'Casrai's a benign genius. Maybe in view of the ugliness of human nature, it's the only alternative to universal chaos.

"But if that's the way human nature works, I don't want any part of it. Oh, I know I should have thought of all this before, and that it looks as if I were squealing just because I happened to be the one who drew the unlucky number. But better late than never! I decline to perform the service requested of me. I'll use any means to avoid performing it. And I'll urge others to do the same. Goodby folks, I'm cutting loose."

Willisoun walked toward him stiff-legged. "You won't get far, you cowardly..."

Norm's right to the jaw connected. Willisoun hit the tilted floor-section, bounced, came to rest. His fogged eyes, glaring crookedly at Norm, were half-moons of sick hate. Groping for support, his hands happened to close on the flower he had dropped earlier. Fingers and thumb squeezed the remaining petals to mush.

Norm turned and walked out.

AT THE togsrack he jerked on his walking clothes, automatically transferring his death notice from hand to hand. A blast of chill air cut his face as he left the weatherdome, but he did not pull down his veil.

A red sunset struck golden glints from the fantastic, cloud-piercing spires of the New City, made a golden pillar to heaven of Supracenter, whence M'Casrai might even now be looking paternalistically down. Norm

turned his back on that fancied gaze and headed for the Old City's ragged, low skyline, blackly silhouetted by the angry rays.

A half hour's furious walking carried him out of the interurban green belt with its bizarre mingling of weather-domes and winter. The tree-lined avenues gave way to steep-walled canyons, through which the wind dipped and tore. Resilient plastic pavement of a relatively recent date blotted out the distinction between sidewalk and street, as no vehicular traffic was permitted in these narrow ways. Occasional roofs, however, had been adapted as landing stages for riding sticks and copters.

There were people abroad. All over the world, old city populations were dropping, and there was talk of clearing them out altogether. But individuals clung to these outmoded, time-hallowed warrens, the more tenaciously as it became possible to live a more isolated life in them. Not everyone relished the highly paced and socialized existence of the new city skylons.

Unconsciously Norm increased his alertness. One thing M'Caslrai was supposed to have said this afternoon was quite true: the murder rate had soared fantastically—and the Old City was a Mecca for deviants and discontents.

Every night brought its quota of killings and assaults, most of them purposeless outbursts of cruelty and lust, as if all the Jack-the-Rippers of the past had been reincarnated a hundredfold. Everyone was suspect. The gray-garbed police Norm passed were too ostentatious in their disregard of him, and once or twice he got the impression he was being followed.

He paid no particular attention. His mind kept chewing on the scene that had occurred back home, rehearsing it again and again—sometimes in its

rightful setting, sometimes against a background of darkness, sometimes against a magnified ghostly version of M'Caslrai's gaunt, homely, reproachful face—until the lesser faces of his family circle became the painful, too vivid distortions of an olden time surrealist painter, with personalities to match. Greet his mother, sunk most of the time in a kind of heavy brooding that almost cut her off from the world; hungrily affectionate yet completely unsympathetic, taking all emotion for her province and no one else's. Jon his father, whittled by timidity down to the tiniest shred of a man, driven frantic by the slightest friction, living in a painstakingly fabricated dream-world where his decisions amounted to something. Allisoun, constantly veering between an hysterical romance-fed primness and an equally hysterical love-thirst. Willisoun, superficially more adjusted than the rest, with his important, quietly mysterious government job, but alternating his hail-fellow-well-met manner with a surliness that might hide anything—Norm couldn't forget the diseased hate that had been in his eyes at the last and the way his hand had closed on the flower.

A panorama from which past centuries peered out more and more often, slipped by half-noticed as he pushed deeper and deeper into the Old City. Walls of brick and stone, patched here and there with panels of glastic indicating still-inhabited dwelling units. Rusted vents that might be the remains of pre-electronic air-conditioning systems. Boxes overhead that had housed microwave traffic control systems. Once he went down an alleyway paved with a worn stone-substitute, and occasionally the fringe of his attention strayed to dusty windows that looked suspiciously like ancient glass.

As he turned out of the alleyway into a scarcely wider street, he met a

small hurrying figure in green walking togs. He brushed past her, but she turned and stared at him closely after a quick glance at his gloved left hand. For a moment impulse and prudence fought in her narrowly elfin face. Then she turned and followed him.

SHE WAS not Norm's only follower. Another, taller and more darkly clad, melted back into the alleyway at her appearance, then after a moment continued his hungrily striding pursuit, avoiding the broad luminescent bands on pavement and walls. Except for the ghostly light cast by those stripes, it was becoming rapidly darker.

Gradually and silently, the two pursuers closed in. The one farther back took something thin and bright from his pouch, held it so that it was masked by his forearm.

Suddenly, at the mouth of another and darker alleyway, Norm stopped. He had come to a decision about the four faces leering in his mind.

"They're insane," he said aloud, lifting his clenched hands, "The whole pack of them."

A golden gleam caught his attention. He realized that he had been clutching his death notice all this time. He held it up to the phosphorescent wall-band.

It was his passport back to respectability. By means of it he could still be reconciled with his family and associates, still die with honor. It symbolized the fact that it was not too late to turn back.

He took it between his fingers and prepared to rip it across.

Someone touched his arm. He jerked around. He vaguely remembered having passed this girl in green a few corners back, but now for the first time he saw her slim face, her oddly animated eyes. Something tugged at his memory.

"You said you think they're all insane?" she asked softly.

He nodded doubtfully. He didn't understand how she could know to whom he was referring.

An unusual look, almost an evil joyful look, came into her eyes, which never left his face. She smiled slyly and leaned forward. After a considerable pause she whispered.

"You're right. They *are* all insane. You and I too. The whole world is crazy. The only difference is that you and I *know*."

For an extraordinary moment the only things Norm could see clearly were her strange fey eyes. Everything else was darkly rocking. The floor of his mind had tilted and the ideas were slipping, sliding.

"You believe that?" she whispered.

Norm realized that he was nodding his head.

She laughed. "Then you'd better not tear up your death notice," she said. "You may find a better use for it."

It is hard to say what made Norm whirl around again at that moment. Hardly a noise, for the attack, though swift, was horribly soundless. Perhaps he got his cue from a movement of the air, or a doubly reflected gleam from the blade gripped in the second follower's hand.

But whirl he did, and simultaneously duck, and the blade, abruptly glowing as if white-hot, drove just over his shoulder, inches from his face.

Hardly losing a moment in recovering, the dark attacker ripped sideways at the girl.

But Norm was swift too, as if his subconscious had long been preparing for this. He caught hold of a fold of dark fabric and jerked. The glowing blade sliced air in front of the green girl's throat.

Riding with the jerk, the attacker swung around with a serpentine swiftness, like a murderer in a nightmare,

and stabbed out at his victim.

But Norm caught the knife hand and drove blow after blow at the black-swathed jaw, unmindful of the fingers that tried to pry his loose and of the electron-edged blade that twitched at his undersleeve, slicing the tough fabric to ribbons.

He felt the figure weaken. He set his feet and drove home a solidier blow.

Sparking as it hit, the knife dropped to the pavement. The figure slumped, sprawled full length across one of the phosphorescent bands.

Norm bent over it. Faintly in his ears, a police-screch echoed. The girl tugged at his sleeve, saying, "Why did he . . . ? Do you know who he is?"

Yet when Norm pulled aside the black veil, it was the girl who whispered, "Willisoun!"

The police-screch sounded clearer. A search-beam probed up and down.

The girl said, "They mustn't find us."

Norm was fumbling around on his hands and knees.

"Come on!" The girl caught hold of his sleeve.

The search-beam found them. The screch came three times, rapidly.

"Please!" The girl was trying to drag him toward the alleyway. "If you're what I think you are, and if you're willing to trust me at all—"

But it was because Norm did trust her—and remembered what she had said—that he delayed. Scooping up the fallen death notice, he jumped to his feet. Together they hurried down the dark alleyway.

CHAPTER II

THERE WAS little sleep as that night went around the world. In scattered offices weary-eyed actuaries fed information tapes into machines for a last check on their figures. It

was not only the number of war deaths that must be accurately calculated, (and if they calculated one too many, they were morally guilty of murder), but also the exact amounts of material slated for destruction. There were thousands of factors that must never be lost sight of. Some were real, such as prices, availability, production and transportation costs, statistics on total expenditures from the last wars. Some were arbitrary, such as the equivalating of so many wounded casualties to one death, or the substitution of raw for processed materials. While some were frank extrapolations, such as the regrettable necessity for allowing for the greater destruction made possible by modern technology. Although this factor must of course be shaved as much as possible, it would never do to overlook it completely.

Elsewhere, electronic wheels were set in motion that would result in sharply upped transmutation, synthesizing, processing and agricultural production. Auxiliary power plants were opened. Amazingly dispersed munitions factories began to take form. The first of the great triphibian transports started down the production line.

Teletaction made it possible for major and minor executives all over the world to hold thousands of conferences as efficiently and comfortably as if each conferring group were together in the same room—and, indeed, it gave just that effect. Arrangements for a quarter-hillion job transfers were smoothly concluded. Priorities on critical materials were argued out. Psychologists put the finishing touches on courses of orientation for death. Deadlines were determined for putting into effect a complete system of civilian rationing, for a period of belt-tightening was a profoundly necessary part of the war.

Various entertainment—chains and vice-rings, openly encouraged or at

least winked by police authorities, prepared for expanded activities.

Religion, which had turned its back on God and devoted itself to the worship of man and man's destiny, likewise laid plans.

In a billion homes the lights stayed on. In one out of twenty there was numbing shock, hopeless horror, agonized grief, unanswerable questionings, spasms of rebellion. In the other nineteen there was a feeling of relief so intense as to preclude sleep, mingled with stern self-questionings and an uneasy sense of guilt.

Everywhere was mounting nervous tension, which would hold for months, until the thing was over. Despite this, scattered experts scanning the hourly statistics gave vent to long anticipated sighs of relief, as they saw the suicide rate drop almost to zero and the murder and assault rates swoop almost as low. Mankind had something bigger to worry about than personal miseries and compulsions.

If there was any single emotion that came close to being universal, that touched both the high and the low, those on the spot and those off it, it was fear—an irrational, nerve-tightening dread. More than a century had passed since the last true conflict, but the sense of an enemy lingered subconsciously, to be revived when the war-patterns were reestablished. Odd noises and odors brought quickening heartbeats. Men who walked or flew abroad looked over their hunched shoulders, as if expecting the plunge of the robot bomb or the blue stab of the ray or the silent snowfall of radioactive death. Men on shipboard scanned the empty waters, as if expecting them to be broken, stealthily or with a convulsive splash, by the emerging of a murder-bent triphibian. Men inside were troubled by an uneasiness about the lights, as if all those bright windows on the night

side of Earth formed too conspicuous a beacon for some unknown foe lurking in the depths of space.

IN WORLD Director M'Caslrai's office atop Supracenter there was a total absence of bustle and noise, as was perhaps appropriate at the focal point of all this activity. No lights blinked, no secretary-machines hummed, no color-changing maps and graphs troubled the cool gray of the walls, no distant subordinates appeared in teletactive counterpart seeking okays or advice. M'Caslrai was alone.

His tall, tired, gangling frame was relaxed. Superficially his face was tranquil. It was a big brooding face, seamed with significant wrinkles. As capable of stern decision as of drollery, but somehow always genial. A face on which history was clearly written. The face of a man who knew men, and how to handle them.

In the whole room, only one thing moved; M'Caslrai's gnarled fore-finger. Back and forth it scratched an inch of chair-arm. Back and forth. Back and forth.

He looked like a great leader who, after a momentous decision, permits himself the painful luxury of weighing his actions for a last time, of asking himself whether he could possibly have taken any other course, of totting up the suffering his decision would cause against the suffering it had averted.

And yet, beneath the surface, there was something shockingly wrong in the picture M'Caslrai presented. A certain uncouthness of posture may have had something to do with it, a hint of stiffness in the dark garments. Yet those were only details. You couldn't put your finger on the main cause. But whatever that was, there was a sense of monstrous hidden abnormality about the man, the persistent suggestion that M'Caslrai was profoundly out of place—either in space, or time.

He did not look up as J'Wilobe entered unannounced. The slim, lean-jawed Secretary of Dangers had an expression that would have seemed fretful, had it not been so intense. Again there was that instant impression of abnormality, but with J'Wilobe its cause was not obscure. You felt you were looking at the human counterpart of a highly intelligent hybrid of lemur and ferret.

His gaze roved suspiciously to either side as he came through the door. He paced back and forth for a few moments biting his lip, then let fall, "I found another of those damned chess sets."

M'Casrai stirred, slowly rubbed his dark-guttered eyelids.

"Makes three in a week," J'Wilobe continued in staccato bursts. "I destroyed it, of course, but it shook me up. Obviously, someone knows I could have been the greatest chess-player in the world." He threw back his head. "Knows I gave up the game to devote myself wholly to government—couldn't serve two masters. Knows what a vice chess is. Knows how I'm still tempted. Leaves the sets around to upset me. Knows what the sight of one does to me."

He continued to pace.

M'Casrai raised his tangled eyebrows.

"Mister J'Wilobe...." he began, wagging a forefinger at the Secretary of Dangers.

J'Wilobe stared intently at the extended digit. His lean arms tightened against his sides. His face paled a trifle.

M'Casrai made a fist of his hand. "Your pardon, sir," he said, smiling humbly. "I had forgotten your.... idiosyncrasy. But to continue. You're getting at something bigger than the chessmen?"

J'Wilobe faced him. "Right! The

chessmen are only a single minor instance. I can put my finger on.... I mean, point out.... I mean, designate, a hundred comparable cases. Could have told you weeks ago, except I wanted to be absolutely sure. It's so unlikely, you see. But unlikely or not, the evidence is overwhelming. We are up against an organized underground opposition, the methods and like of which...."

M'Casrai raised his hand. "One moment, Mister J'Wilobe. I believe that this matter you are about to expound is of the highest significance. I think it best, therefore, that we call in the others."

J'Wilobe pressed his lips together, shook his head.

"Inscra and Heshifer at a minimum," M'Casrai pressed.

J'WILOBE shrugged an unwilling consent. While M'Casrai used the teletactor, he stepped outside and signalled to a bruised-jawed young man who was fingering a cut flower.

"You're in shape for a job tonight, Willisoun?" he asked,

Willisoun nodded.

"Any word as yet on the thugs who assaulted you in the Old City?"

Willisoun shook his head.

"I dislike men who run into danger," said J'Wilobe. "Be more cautious in the future. Regarding your present assignment, a secret conference is about to be held in M'Casrai's office. When it breaks up, hold yourself in readiness to follow anyone whom I designate. Remember, it may be anyone—even M'Casrai. And be sure to make yourself invisible. You too frequently neglect that precaution. I dislike careless men."

When he returned, M'Casrai was busying himself taking a box out of a cabinet, setting it on his desk. The World Director went out of his way

to pull forward a chair, so that there were four arranged at comfortable distances around the desk. His movements were tired and slow, but suggested reservoirs of inward strength.

Inscra arrived first by a matter of moments. The General Secretary was an expressionless, ponderous individual, who always seemed to be moving through a denser medium than air. Only his eyes looked alive, and even there one could not be sure that the animating force was life.

Secretary of Minds Heshifer was almost the exact opposite. A small man, ridiculously spry for one so aged, with bald head and a brushy white beard. Fussy, pedantic, quick-witted, expression always ashift.

M'Caslrai welcomed them with a friendly gesture. Then he opened the box and lifted out a bottle.

The movement dislodged a tiny grey something which scuttled across the desk. No one else reacted, but Inscra jerked back with a convulsive gasp.

Heshifer captured the something with a flick of his hand, as though it were an insect. "A scrap of memo tape," he remarked, looking. No one said anything, though it was with difficulty that Inscra tore his gaze away from Heshifer's half-closed hand.

M'Caslrai carefully tilted the bottle. From the seemingly sealed neck an amber liquid poured.

"Afterwards you can serve yourself, gentlemen," he said, indicating the four glasses with courtly awkwardness. "Mister J'Wilobe has something to tell us."

Hand still shaking a little, Inscra tossed his off. Heshifer sipped appreciatively. J'Wilobe lifted his to his lips, sniffed it, looked around suspiciously, hesitated, set it down.

"You all know that there are forces working against us," he began abruptly. "Though some of you don't like to

admit it." He glared at Heshifer, who shrugged blithely. "Secret, underground forces, bent on upsetting the social order, on destroying the present government, and especially on sabotaging the war. There is evidence that similar forces were active to some degree during past wars. They could have been brought into the open long before this, if there had not been so much objection in some quarters to the unlimited questioning of suspects which I urged—the employment of emotional purging and similar methods of persuasion."

"You know I do not like to see people treated that way," said M'Caslrai gently. "Though of course, if the safety of the world and the glory of Man are at stake...and if there is a threat to the young men who are giving up their lives..."

"Naturally any opposition must be liquidated," said Inscra sharply, "if it exists."

J'Wilobe smiled. "The opposition exists. It is only the strangeness of its methods—the puzzling quality of its stratagems—that keeps most individuals from becoming aware of it." He looked around with a veiled contemptuousness, then said suddenly, "Who would suspect—gifts? I mean, if the gifts were perfectly okay and each happened to be the thing its recipient most wanted. Yet gifts can be deadly. You don't give drink to a drunkard just before the day's work. Especially you don't give it to a reformed drunkard. Nevertheless, within the past two weeks dozens of such 'gifts' have been made, always anonymously, to some of our highest executives and most trusted subordinates. There is, in my own case, a matter of chess sets."

Heshifer muttered something that ended with "...as impossible as telepathy," then snorted, "If that's all you have to tell us—"

"It's only a beginning. Next among

these nuisance tactics of the opposition, comes—voices. Voices in the dark or over dark teletactors, voices dubbed into reading tapes, unplaceable voices heard for a moment in crowds—all reminding the individual of unpleasant incidents that happened in his childhood, incidents he wants to forget, or incidents that never happened, but that the voice is trying to convince him did.

"Yet another secret weapon—monotony. Lights that begin to blink, sounds that begin to drone, taped words and sentences that repeat themselves over and over.

"Think how such 'harmless' means can be used to distract men, to upset them, to ruin their efficiency!

"Finally, something you all know about—this epidemic of what we've called convulsive accidents. Cases of mild poisoning and electric shock, with the victim suffering muscular spasms and going into a hazy and unrealistic mental state that sometimes lasts for days. There have been altogether too many of those 'accidents'. More-over—"

HE BROKE off to look at Inscra. The General Secretary had just given an abrupt nod, and his eyes looked more than ever alive—or whatever it was. His voice was like them.

"I think I see what you're getting at, J'Wilobe. I've come across similar cases myself, and I believe now that you are right in considering them significant. What is more, I can add another type of occurrence. Several workers in one of my sub-departments have been troubled by what we called overtiredness. They gradually become slow in their movements, their eyes seem to glaze, they go into what you could describe as a mild trance. In that trance they give utterance to irresponsible, foolish ideas. For brief hazy periods, they doubt things which

should not be even doubted—even war. I have paid no attention—these days, a certain amount of mental fatigue is taken for granted. In one case, though, I remember that an analysis of the blood happened to be made, and the presence of a primitive chemical noted—insulin. I thought nothing of it at the time, but now...."

He broke off and restlessly reached for the bottle—just at the moment Heshifer happened to do likewise. The smaller man was ahead of him, so Inscra set his glass on the table. As Heshifer picked up the bottle, the small gray thing fluttered from his hand to the floor. Instantly Inscra shrank back, repeating his former erratic behavior. There was a moment of confusion. Heshifer set his foot on the thing, muttered a quick "I'm sorry," stooped, picked it up, shoved it in his pouch. Then he poured the drinks, handing Inscra's his.

As they settled back, M'Casirai spoke. He had been sprawling back in his armchair, listening carefully, making no comment.

"Mister J'Wilobe, that's a mighty interesting matter you've been narrating to us, and one we've got to act on right quick, but I don't think you've quite got the hang of it. You see what's happening—and you're right in thinking that it's hostile. Yes, you can bet you are—but you don't yet see the *why*."

With almost a twinkle in his eye, he turned to Heshifer. "I'd have thought you'd have spotted it. After all, you're Secretary of Minds. But no, it would be unfair to expect any of you to get it. I never would myself, except I like to poke around in the byways of history. And that's where you have to poke this time, boys—way back in the twentieth century, old reckoning."

His voice was both droll and dead

serious as he continued, "In those days they didn't treat deviants and eccentrics as we do now. They had a lot of queer methods, some barbaric, some rather fanciful. I happened to read up on them. They had a thing called hypnotism, a little like our mental persuasion. A way of opening someone's mind to suggestion, chiefly through the skillful use of monotony.

"Then there was psychoanalysis—a prying into the depths of the victim's mind; a searching for his earliest experiences, to be used as levers to change his attitudes.

"Occupational therapy was another. Like the other methods, they used it on the people they called insane. It was a matter of getting the person to do something he liked to do, something that would occupy his mind—you presented him with a well-chosen 'gift'.

"Mustn't forget shock treatment, of course. That was a prime favorite of theirs for the insane, and pretty barbaric. Electric or chemical shock, to dredge up forgotten thoughts and emotions.

"Or what they called truth serums. Chemicals designed to let down inhibitions, to make the victim speak out his hidden thoughts.

"Reckon you get it, gentlemen?"

The silence lasted. Inscra looked stupified. Heshifer half befuddled, half incredulous. While J'Wilobe's reaction was closer to anger.

"Do you mean to tell me that the opposition thinks we are 'insane'?" He pronounced the archaic word distastefully.

M'Caslrai nodded. "That's the way I figure it."

"And they're treating us as such? Trying to 'cure' us?"

"That's about the size of it, Mister J'Wilobe," said M'Caslrai mildly.

"But...but..." The thick, mum-

bly quality of Inscra's words focussed attention on him. He looked more than stupified now. He looked drugged.

"What I want to know...." He stumbled again.

"His eyes!" breathed J'Wilobe. "The truth serum!"

Over them, a few minutes ago so unpleasantly alive, there had fallen a veil.

He managed to finish:

"...is, are we really? I mean, are we really insane? Tell me, someone, are we?"

CHAPTER III

THE entry-indicator blinked as Heshifer hustled into the limited elevator.

"Anyone in your family get a death notice?" he asked conversationally.

The fat operator shook his head. "But I got a nephew who did."

Heshifer clucked sympathetically.

"He's a crazy kid," the operator volunteered. "Be the making of him, except...."

"Yes, of course," said Heshifer gently and leaped into abstraction.

Plummeting from the eyrie atop Supracenter toward the deepest basement, the elevator accelerated, then achieved such a smooth and steady speed that it seemed to stop.

The Secretary of Minds looked the perfect pedant. Judging from his vague eyes, pursed lips, and jutting beard, he might have been thinking of something highly obscure or of nothing at all—in no case anything practical.

He swung around. Save for himself and the operator, the cage was empty. Restlessly he walked to the stair, popped up far enough to survey the second floor.

With a shrug he resumed his me-

ditations. But one might have noticed the faintest of frowns troubling his tufty white eyebrows.

The elevator stopped. Again the indicator blinked as, with an amiable but abstracted nod, Heshifer stepped out and turned sharply to the left.

The operator craned his neck curiously and took a step sideways—then recoiled, clutching his shoulder.

There had been no second passenger, the indicator had not blinked, but his eyes, watching the resilient flooring a few paces behind Heshifer, filled with horror. In a panic of haste he shut the door and started back up.

Like a self-important little mole returning to his lair, Heshifer hurried along the lonely corridor until he reached the insulated precincts of the Deep Mental Lab. As he scuttled through the file room, he blinked familiarly at the clerks, who were busy getting taped transcripts of brain-wave records for mental dossiers of deviants and troublemakers. A large number of such dossiers were being requested by psychologists at war-reception centers.

Inside his private office, Heshifer's manner changed. The blink and bustle dropped away, leaving a soft-footed, enigmatic watchfulness. After a few minutes efficiently spent in teletacting requests and instructions, he slipped through an inner door.

He had gone fifty feet down a narrow gray corridor when, without warning, he swung around. This time he did not bother to mask the suspicious frown. For ten seconds he stood motionless, his eyes roving over the empty corridor behind him, his ears drinking in the faintest sounds. Arriving at a decision, he returned to his office and searched it thoroughly. Then he set auxiliary electronic locks on the outer and inner doors and, with a shrug, started once more down the narrow corridor.

He did not notice the faint imprints that appeared and disappeared in the flooring a dozen feet behind him.

After a short walk he paused and traced with his forefinger a design on the blank wall. He ducked through the doorway that suddenly yawned.

The secondary corridor descended at a gentle angle. Some hundred feet from the entrance a barely audible clink brought him to a stop. A section of wall beside him became transparent, revealing a young, vigilant face.

"The tunnel's clear?" asked Heshifer.

The watcher nodded.

"All electronic barriers set? No visitors for the Old City ahead of me? No indications of spy-beams?"

More nods answered him.

"Thanks, doc," said Heshifer.

The transparency became a blank wall. Heshifer hurried on.

The imprints followed him. There was no clink as they passed the critical point.

Heshifer emerged on a small platform in a chamber of moderate size. Beyond the platform were two gleaming metallic troughs, which led off side by side, into the mouths of twin tunnels. In the troughs were cradled a number of small cylindrical vehicles.

Heshifer opened the port of the nearest and climbed in. Almost silently, with swift smooth acceleration, the vehicle glided into the tunnel and whisked out of sight.

Nothing happened for perhaps a dozen seconds. Then—no one appeared, but the port of the second vehicle opened and, after a brief pause, closed. Softly the vehicle started forward.

NORM LOOKED up doubtfully at the girl in green. He was still uncertain whether to take her idly-tossed revelations as confetti or gre-

nades. Coming here had been a confusion of screeching alleys, ruinous basements, ambiguous passageways, a careening ride inside a metal mole, until he had stumbled out into the final surprise of soft silent corridors lined with flowers. His mind still buzzed with it.

Nevertheless he was sure of one thing: that he felt more at home in this strange little subterranean room than he ever had in his own dwelling.

The girl in green swung her legs from a table near the archway. It was obvious that she was aware of their trimness. She looked at him innocently, like an elf on the witness stand.

"You mean," he fumbled, "that you consider yourselves attendants in one huge insane asylum?"

She grinned approvingly. "Except that the lunatics hold the balance of power. And so we have to walk very softly. Or else—it really doesn't matter—we're the insane ones, bent on warping the minds of the majority. We're monomaniacs on the topic, I warn you of that. And with all the dangerousness of monomaniacs. What's the matter anyway? Beginning to doubt that a world which devised war could be anything but insane?"

"Of course not, but in spite of what you started to say about your organization's long historical background, it all seems so...."

"Hit or miss? We don't live up to your idea of a powerful secret society?"

"I guess that's what I mean."

She smiled.

"But look at the casual way you picked me up and started to tell me things," he protested. "How do you know I won't betray you?"

"You'd prefer a lot of mumbo-jumbo—oaths, tests, initiations?" she inquired solicitously. "It wouldn't occur to you, I suppose, that we might have been watching you for a long

time? Or that any organization is strong only insofar as it *can* act on the spur of the moment?"

"Yes, but...."

"And, as for betraying us, where are we now?"

"Under the Old City."

"But where?"

"I don't know. It was dark, and there were those crazy tunnels."

"Exactly. And who am I?"

"You said to call you J'Quilvens."

"Yes, but who am I? Where would you find me?"

"I don't know."

"You see. You wouldn't make such a valuable traitor after all." She smoothed the skirt of her green slip. "Besides we have reason to trust you. You passed a test when we first met."

He shook his head. He was beginning to like her very much. "You're wrong there. I was just fighting in self defense. And Willisoun wasn't after you."

She smiled. "You've a lot to learn about your precious potential brother-in-law. You didn't even know that he worked for J'Wilobe."

"He's quite a problem child, Willisoun," she added dreamily. Then, after a moment, "You're in love with his sister?"

"Look," said Norm quickly, "You were going to tell me about the background of your movement."

J'Quilvens smiled, lit two smouldering sticks, tossed him one, leaned back, sniffing the aromatic smoke, and casually began. Very much like a small girl uttering whatever fancies came into her head—the muse of history's brat tattling.

"IT STARTED in the twentieth century, old reckoning. There was still some insight then into the psychological state of the world. They

realized that certain nations were for all practical purposes insane—paranoid, regressive, schizoid.

"But the larger truth was ignored. Only a few men realized that abnormal psychology was far more fruitful than the normal variety for the simple reason that it was truer. That from the beginning man had behaved abnormally, believing fiercely in things that didn't exist, posing all sorts of weird forces for which there wasn't a grain of evidence, exalting his prejudices and eccentricities, his little private experiences, into vast, cosmic fabrics of morality. That to a large extent all civilization was just one gigantic case history.

"Of those few doubtful men, a handful happened to contact each other. They shared their insights and grew a little more certain of their ground. They said, 'We're not like ordinary psychiatrists, who seek only to make sound maniacs out of sick maniacs. We presume to view man against the cosmic background, his littleness and misery and hunger, his boastings and cringings, his tricks and pretenses, his terrors and hallucinations, his kickings and squirmings, his shrieks and snarls. We want to teach him to laugh at himself. And some day, in spite of himself, we'll drive him sane!'"

For a moment Norm felt that she was looking through him.

Then, leaning forward, lightly resting elbows on knees, she continued quietly, "Whenever they had the time and opportunity—for all of them were tied to irksome routines—they investigated. Some of them studied the modern symptoms of the world's madness, probed the symbolic mass-dreams hidden in art, propaganda, and advertising. Others concentrated on the traumas that had occurred while mankind was groping from barbarism to civilization—the wars, enslave-

ments, and superstitious delusions that had warped civilization's childhood. Still others tried to determine the prognosis of the ailment.

"The prognosis was negative. Society took several wrong turns. Under the pressure of a ruthless new puritanism, the promising spirit of scientific scepticism was mummified into learned specialities. Basic questions were dodged so often that a general inferiority complex came into existence. Pretense took the place of progress. Fear was enthroned.

"At times the tiny enlightened minority met to exchange their augmented information. Differences of opinion rose. Some boldly attempted to set up the psychiatry of history as a new branch of knowledge. This resulted in a split. Those who resisted realized that their knowledge would merely be assimilated into the general insanity and become a worthless pedantry. As indeed happened—you can still find traces of it in the present philosophy that a certain degree of irrational eccentricity, within strict social limits, is desirable."

Norm nodded. She continued lightly, almost humorously, as if too much seriousness were dangerous. "Times changed. There came the first and second world leagues, the first and second world federations, the War of the Anglo-American Secession, the Wars of the Asiatic Hegemony, the Green Death, the pioneering of the planets.

"The main group kept working in secret. At intervals, after the carefullest consideration, new members were admitted.

"The organization shifted with the times, responsive to winds of influence. Sometimes it was almost open; sometimes, when suspicious tyranny was enthroned, it was secret—though there were times, I imagine, when it

survived solely because no policeman or politician would take it seriously—it inclined to such long-range views that it seldom became involved in practical action. And that," she added bitterly, "is not entirely a past matter.

"Sometimes the members considered it little more than a nonsensical hobby. Sometimes they were almost dead serious. Sometimes there were bursts of activity—meetings, discussions, plans. Sometimes members lost touch with each other for decades, almost for lifetimes.

"They never had a real name. Sometimes they called themselves the Company of the Sane, or the League of Psychiatrists. They got into the habit of addressing each other as 'doctor' or 'geodoc' because the world was their patient.

"TIMES continued to change. The world state was born and the worship of man. War as we know it today came into existence—not, like you've been taught to believe, as the result of logical analysis, but because a civil-war army, sworn to suicide in case of failure, thought they'd been trapped before the war began and jumped the gun on self-destruction.

"The final, fixed phase in the psychosis of history had set in. The docs half woke from their centuries of dabbling and realized that they could no longer evade the problem facing them. Though their organization was almost at its lowest ebb, the time had come to act.

"In the face of a socialization, regimentation, and surveillance more intense than any they had faced before, they went back to the practices of their secretest days—and improved on them. If they had gone underground before, this time they really burrowed. Elaborate precautions were taken to

prevent infiltration by spies. A cell-system was set up, to avoid too much mutual acquaintance of members.

"Cautiously they began to experiment at influencing the world. Sometimes they worked on individuals, sometimes on groups. They tried out all the psychological and secret propaganda techniques that had been developed through the ages, discarding, reviving, improving, inventing. They perfected their methods, gathered data, distributed their members in the most effective pattern for action.

"Wars, being the most tragic of mankind's symptoms, were their chief target. Each war they opposed with every weapon they dared use. Each time they planned and put into effect elaborate psychological counter-programs.

"And yet each time they failed. Wars marched on relentlessly. The counter-programs always dissolved into futile nuisance tactics. Each generation produced its quota of sacrificial deaths. Until now...."

A silvery tone sounded from beyond the archway. J'Quilvens reacted to it, but did not break off. Her eyes burned, there were spots of color in her cheeks, her lips were tight lines. For a moment the elf was a fury.

"And now....we know that we dare not let this war succeed. If we fail, it's the finish. We've studied our own symptoms as well as those of the world. If we fail, we'll merely become an integral part of the universal madness—a futile counter-symptom. We've been too careful, been too much afraid for our own skins, perhaps we've secretly fancied our position as the only sane persons in an insane world. We've got to take chances, try every method, fight!"

"Did I hear someone mention that irrational word?" a cool voice inquired.

A tall shaven-headed man in amber pyjamas was standing in the archway. He was handsome, after the fashion of an ancient Eastern god—aloof, faintly amused, coldly compassionate.

J'Quilvens turned slowly. "I did, F'Sibr."

"He has arrived," he informed her. He looked at Norm, who began to feel uncomfortable.

"I'm coming." J'Quilvens dropped from the table. "Wait here," she told Norm.

The shaven-headed man gave Norm another unrevealing look and followed her out.

CHAPTER IV

"THEY'RE on to us," Heshifer affirmed, his white beard wagging. "This time J'Wilobe's paranoid delusions coincide with reality. And M'Casrai actually spotted our aims and the sources of our methods."

"And yet you're sure you weren't followed." F'Sibr inquired unperturbedly.

"Impossible! As impossible as telepathy!" Heshifer grinned. "Oh, I'll admit my suspicions were roused for a moment, but it wasn't anything. The electronic barriers were all in order."

"You have a weakness for running risks," said F'Sibr mildly. "That business of the chess sets was injudicious. And putting the truth drug into Inscra's drink was impudently foolhardy."

"But don't you see, we've got to be foolhardy!" J'Quilvens broke in eagerly.

"And it did shake them up so beautifully," Heshifer added, smiling reminiscently.

They were conferring in a low, large, comfortably furnished room from which several corridors radiated.

There were softly glowing three-dimensional pictures, bits of sculpture, bunches of flowers, as if a conscious effort had been made to suppress any feeling of underground grimness or of wide-webbed, long-tentacled efficiency.

F'Sibr sat, arms folded. Heshifer paced, sometimes almost skipping, as if trying to keep up with the sudden twists and turns of his thoughts. J'Quilvens perched, playing with a smolder-stick.

"I see no reason to put our general plan in jeopardy," said F'Sibr. "The masked trend toward sanity is increasing as calculated. The propaganda of doubt and distrust, fool-proof and insanity-proof by test, is successfully invading every phase of the war. The master propaganda—"

Heshifer picked up a fragile jar of reddish powder and tossed it in his hand. "What's this?"

"A dyed sample of the new anti-dissociation drug. To resume, the master propaganda, designed to convince every last individual that the war is crookedly administered, is set to go. Everywhere our agents stand ready to usurp key-positions as soon as present civilian executives and war officers gain sufficient insight into the irrationality of their motives as to become incapable of carrying on. You, like the others, have that job to do when, but only when, M'Casrai and the others—"

"You know, it's a funny thing about M'Casrai," said Heshifer, stopping dead. "He always reminds me of someone, but I can't think who."

"A living person?" F'Sibr asked patiently.

"No, I don't think so. I almost get it—and then it's gone. You know, we've never really understood M'Casrai. We've never gotten a convincing

line on his phobias or the general form of his delusions. We cannot even classify his psychosis with any confidence. Compared to the others, his mind's a dark book."

"True. To continue, you'll have your job, and a very important one, when M'Casrai and J'Wilobe and the others lose their grip. Just as I'll have my job, and J'Quilvens hers. There is no justification for endangering the total plan by psychological guerilla tactics and unnecessary risk-running. J'Quilvens, I disapprove of your bringing that boy here." He nodded toward an archway flanked by bowls of flowers.

"There was no other place."

"That is hardly accurate."

"But he did us a service. Besides, he's gotten his death notice, and we'll need every agent we can get in the war forces. He's obvious officer material—and a teletaction expert. You'll need an aide you can trust, and he might fill the bill."

"Conceivably. Nevertheless, I disapprove of the risk you ran in bringing him here."

"Look, F'Sibr," said Heshifer, his eyes twinkling. "Are you getting a leadership complex?"

"Of course I am. Doubtless if I were a glorified mental sniper, I too could maintain a charming irresponsibility." And F'Sibr grinned, every whit as delightedly as Heshifer. But only for a moment. "To conclude, reports indicate that our plan is proceeding according to schedule. Premature assaults, however appealing, might wreck it."

HESHIFER sighed. "It's such a good plan," he said wistfully. "Well?"

"I was thinking of all the past wars and our counter-plans. They

were such good plans too."

"On the contrary, they failed because they contained major flaws. Our present plan is well-calculated."

"The others seemed well-calculated too," said Heshifer softly. "I don't mean to be pessimistic, but I'm the sort of person who doesn't really begin to worry about anything until it threatens his friends—I'd hate to see you two snuffed out along with the rest of the war forces, just because we had such a good plan." Abruptly he grinned. "Look, F'Sibr, I'm worried. Let's get ready—merely get ready—the Chaos Plan, in case."

"The Chaos Plan is worse than no plan at all." F'Sibr's voice had grown gentler than ever, but his face was that of a carved god.

"I don't think so."

"It and the present plan are incompatible. The one would ruin the other."

Heshifer's beard bobbed. "Agreed. But I'm not asking that we put the Chaos Plan into effect—only that we transmit the necessary knowledge to all agents, so they'll be able to use it if the necessity should arise. I have the information in my dossiers on key-personnel here and at the Deep Mental Lab."

"The information alone would be too much of a temptation. It could only be imparted with the strict injunction that it never be used except on order from above, and even then we couldn't be sure. I am against it."

"But I'm worried. Ever since that conference with M'Casrai and J'Wilobe, I've had the feeling..." Heshifer paused and glanced around uneasily.

For once F'Sibr's voice was sharp. "Are you *sure* that you weren't followed?"

Heshifer didn't reply.

NORM WAS getting uneasy. Alone in this gray little room it was

all too easy to wonder whether *this* wasn't insanity, rather than what he'd left. The outside world was getting in its licks.

It was hard to keep M'Caslrai's face out of his mind. Like the mask of a guilty conscience, that gaunt solemn visage kept trying to peer over his shoulder, sorrow rather than anger in the dark-circled eyes.

When he thought of his father and mother, of Allisoun, even of Willisoun, the sense of nauseous abnormality, recently so keen, was blunted. He pictured them doing the familiar, inconsequential things that make up the round of daily life.

They were his people. They were home.

Whereas these strangers—

If he'd listened to M'Caslrai—

Perhaps he'd make a big mistake—

He didn't exactly ask himself these questions, but it was becoming hard not to.

He wished J'Quilvens would return. He walked over to the archway, simultaneously becoming aware of a flowery odor that registered unpleasantly—why, he couldn't for the moment remember.

It occurred to him that her "Wait here" hardly constituted an order. Almost before he realized it, he was tip-toeing down the curving corridor.

With every step the odor of flowers became more pronounced.

A little later he saw the source— a room thick as a garden with blooms, each one pouring into the air its sickening stench.

He took a couple more silent steps. He made out among the flowers, the amber sleeve of the cryptic fellow who had summoned J'Quilvens. He became aware of a mumble of talk and thought he recognized her voice.

He began to feel embarrassed. He couldn't hear what they were saying,

but he knew his actions would be interpreted as those of an eavesdropper—and a silly eavesdropper at that.

Yet to tip-toe back would be sillier still.

Nevertheless, he had about decided to, when something caught his eye.

It was a blue flower in the bowl to the righthand side of the archway ahead.

One of its petals was rolling and unrolling, like a tiny scroll.

The horror of this tiny action was not diminished by his dreamlike conviction that it was familiar—something he had witnessed a hundred times.

Unwillingly, helplessly, as in a dream, one hand outstretched, he stole forward.

Like trivial detail at the edge of an absorbing picture, the amber-coated man came into view, and beyond him J'Quilvens and a small gnomish person with a white beard.

The petal jerked from the flower, fluttered down, came to rest beside an odd irregularity in the flooring—a double depression like that made by a pair of moccasins.

Another petal began to roll and unroll.

The mumble of talk stopped.

He reached for the flower and his hand encountered in the air a cold, flexible, metallic surface.

There was a whirl of movement. Something slammed into his shoulder. The block in his mind lifted. He remembered who always fingered flowers.

Half reflex, half calculation—his hands grabbed at the air and closed on a metal-sleeved forearm. There was a jerk and he rocked forward. From where the forearm's hand would be, a dazzling blue beam hissed past

his face, scorching his cheek. Twisting away, he shifted his grip, one hand sliding toward the wrist, the other twining, getting leverage.

There was a spatter of molten drops as the blue beam traveled along the ceiling into the room ahead, and down. He was dimly aware of figures diving to either side.

There was a smothered grunt of pain. The blue beam was extinguished and something hit the floor with a tiny thud. The pinioned arm writhed free of his grip. Two bowls of flowers crashed to the floor a dozen feet ahead.

THEN EVERYTHING froze. As if they were parts of a scene revealed by a lightning flash, Norm noted the smouldering path of the beam, the scattered flowers, J'Quilvens crouched beyond them, the gnomelike old man peering over an upset table, the amber-coated man on hands and knees but starting up, like a leopard about to spring. In the whole room, nothing moved, save the eyes of those three.

Where the tiny thud had come from, Norm noted a faint depression in the flooring, as if a lightweight object rested there.

Something crushed one of the scattered flowers.

The old man popped up, arm raised and threw. A small jar shattered in the air a few feet from Norm, loosing a splash of red dust.

A partial man of red dust darted toward Norm. He recoiled.

The amber-coated man sprang.

Red dust and amber coat tangled, slammed down near the faint depression.

The blue beam flared again, charred a crazy design on the ceiling, came down, shortened to inches,

splashed molten sparks from fading red dust, seared something else.

There was a muffled scream of agony. The beam continued to flare for several more seconds.

Then Norm realized the amber-coated man was getting to his feet, that the old man was fumbling near a smoking hole in the air eight inches off the floor, that J'Quilvens was watching.

The amber-coated man was looking at him coolly, and he heard him say, "I think you were right about the boy, J'Quilvens."

He heard the old man remark pedantically, "Now that's an interesting reflection on scientific progress. Here we have a complete electronic warning system, and this invisible fellow slips right through because every radiant impulse is neatly routed around him. Whereas any primitive alarm system set off by the weight of a passing person would have shown him up instantly. Though that too would have failed if he had combined levitation with invisibility. But if we had a sure, simple way of detecting air displacement..."

He pulled something away, and after a brief scrutiny rolled it back. Willisoun's dead face was not pleasant.

"Useful, this fabric," he commented. "Though fortunately not strong enough to re-route a burn blast. J'Wilobe must have some research projects we don't know about. Bad. We'll want to analyze this stuff carefully."

"Yes," said the amber-coated man sharply. "But not now, and not here." J'Quilvens and the old man looked around.

"We have only minutes," he told them. "Maybe they didn't have a spy-beam tracing Willisoun—or another invisible man!—but you can bet their

Instruments picked up that burn blast. And how long does it usually take J'Wilobe's men to draw a cordon in the Old City? Come on!"

CHAPTER V

LIKE A DARK star traveling toward collision with Earth, hurtling or barely crawling across the interstellar void according to which time-scale nervous minds chose, the war entered its fifth month.

From thousands of noiseless, nerve-wrackingly unreal factories weapons and equipment poured forth. Silently triphibian-sections swung together, interwove, were flawlessly joined. In an unending slow-paced stream the completed transports slid stealthily into the air, bound on test runs outside the atmosphere and in the depths of the ocean on whose restless surface their final destiny would be worked out.

From robot farm and mine streams of grain and metal flowed to dumps near ports of embarkation. There too went the barges that would carry the materials on the last leg of their journey. People gazed in awe at these gargantuan stockpiles. An ancient war would eat them steadily, day by day, but this war must take them at one gulp.

Civilians went about with surface casualness, working longer, eating skimpier, playing less. The fear that had troubled them on the first night had retreated deep into their nerves, where it did not lack for companions.

Amusement areas were closed, except to those who could show a death notice. Inside them, unlimited pleasure was provided, since a softening as well as a hardening of fiber was part of the plan for the chosen.

Religion, such as it was, thrived. The ministers of the man-worshipping cult did boom-town business. Monster

mass-meetings were held daily, with believers either telepresent or in the flesh. At them, emotions were purged almost as effectively though less painfully than by the machines in the dungeons of J'Wilobe's secret police. Afterwards a few hysterical women would offer themselves for the volunteer service. Among the gray-clad female officers who swore them in was one whose elfin features and smile contrasted sharply with the acid-lipped masculine visage of the average.

Crime was no longer in the spotlight. Except for unpublicized hunts for deserters and even more hushed proceedings against violators of the moral-code, police activities were nil.

High-ranking officers of the war forces, already so worried as to how the men under them would behave that they hardly thought of their own approaching fate, met more frequently to work out exercises in logistics. At one such meeting—fair sample of the rest—a dozen men gathered around a transparent globe on which colored dots and dashes represented triphibian squadrons, barge assemblies, divisions. The ranking officer rose. "Today's problem presupposes a rendezvous in the South Atlantic at the point indicated. How would you handle it, F'Sibr?" An odd note entered his voice as he mentioned the name. Both he and the others showed a peculiar mingling of uneasiness, attraction, and respect as they listened to the big, remote-eyed man explain how the war forces might best make their final five-day voyage.

At thousands of training centers and in the field, men were oriented for death. They met in every form and guise. They became inured to the hot windy whine of burn-blas and stab-ray, no matter how near were the missiles. They learned to face the robot projectile with their number on it and to

trap it in a web of close-range fire no matter with what sentient cleverness it ducked and dodged. In transparent armor they crawled on hands and knees through phosphorescent miles of deadly radioactive dust. They were marooned in bathyspheres on the ocean floor and in space suits beyond the moon, only to be rescued at the last moment. At the word of command they stepped unequipped onto the clouds and were caught a few dozen yards above the ground by diving fliers. In conclaves suggesting those of ancient secret societies they drank down cups of wine, every thousandth one of which was supposedly poisoned. An illusion of invulnerability was built up, along with the habit of absolute obedience. A crammed routine of hardship, pain, pleasure, peril, and glory erased private thoughts almost before they occurred and fostered the feeling that each individual was only a cell in the hand that was fingering the gun, would soon raise it to the temple.

NORM WAS home on furlough. He sat paying lazy attention to a color tune turned on so low that it was only a shifting of shadowy hues around the teletactor. Allisoun leaned her head on his shoulder. His father and mother sat side by side and gazed proudly at the sleek gray uniform with its insignia of rank.

"Who'd ever have thought four months ago," his father philosophized, "that you'd become an officer."

"Not just an officer," his mother corrected. "An aide."

"That's right, Mother. Say, what do you think of this F'Sibr fellow, Norm?"

"Oh—he's rather quiet."

"Now that's very interesting," observed his father, leaning forward brightly. "Tell me all about your

work, Norm. I know it's teletaction, but what exactly do you do?"

"He's tired of talking about that. He wants to enjoy himself. Don't bother him."

"I guess you're right, Mother." But he still regarded Norm hopefully.

Allisoun squeezed Norm's hand gently.

Norm smiled. He was remembering J'Quilvens. Last week they had been alone together, just after he had received a routine hypnotic treatment from F'Sibr to strengthen his mind against government propaganda. He had made love to her. She had threatened to have F'Sibr implant a post-hypnotic dislike for her in his mind. And then she had started him talking about his original ideas for communications sabotage.

J'Quilvens was an oddly attractive girl, oddly enticing...and oddly remote.

He returned the pressure of Allisoun's hand and put his arm around her.

He didn't admire himself for it, but he had to admit that he enjoyed Allisoun's submissiveness and the way she crawled for favors.

Just as he took a cruel pleasure in playing up to his parents' admiration of his uniform and egging them on to say ridiculous things—despite his new understanding of them.

It made him feel uneasy and rather disgusted, but he was unable to resist basking ironically in his pseudogloria.

His father couldn't keep quiet. "It certainly is amazing the way Norm's come along. I'll frankly admit—because I was wrong—that I didn't think he'd make a good soldier. And you'll agree that Norm's behavior, when he first got the news, wasn't encouraging. We were even afraid he'd desert! But now it appears that a military ca-

reer is the very thing for him. Just goes to show how little we know about people—even our own." He stood up, directing his genial lecture at his wife and Allisoun. "Look how he's succeeded. An officer—an aide, Mother!—in four months! Why there's no telling to what heights he may rise, no limit to the positions he may attain—except of course, that..."

He realized his blunder. The silence became painful. He hurried over to the teletactor and began to fiddle with the controls. Faint colors and sounds came and went.

"Any news of Willisoun?" Norm asked lazily.

His mother answered for Allisoun. "Not a word! He must be off on some very important mission, because Allisoun has inquired again and again at his office, but they won't tell her anything."

"I can't understand why he doesn't 'tact' me," Allisoun murmured.

"It must be a very secret mission, dear."

Norm nodded.

"I'm sorry," said Allisoun hesitatingly, "that you and he had that... disagreement before he went away."

Norm nodded and smiled.

A tall ghostly figure materialized in front of the teletactor, became solid as his father adjusted the controls. It stood with its feet sunk in the floor because the teletactor was a little off level.

The gaunt suffering face was M'Caslrai's. Norm sat up straighter. His jaw set. Allisoun looked around at him curiously.

"...because it has always been my practice to talk frankly to critics and detractors," came the tired, plodding voice. "The so-called neohumanitarians have made their plea against certain aspects of the war. This is my answer: It is because we do not want

to see humanity tortured and degraded by conflict that we do this thing. The conscientious objectors have advanced their claims. But I say to them: Be thankful. You are not asked to kill, only to give your lives. The advocates of a 'token' sacrifice have made their suggestions. But I tell them: You can't fool reality with 'token' payments. You can't appease the death-wish with any such shallow trick. Would that we could, folks! Would that we could!"

Norm clenched his fists and twisted a little, like a small boy being upbraided by his parent. It was insanity that M'Caslrai was mouthing, he reminded himself fiercely. Stark lunacy. And yet...

"To all of you I say this: He who casts doubt upon our dreadful sacrifice, he who seeks in the slightest degree to sabotage our war, is a traitor to all..."

Norm was on his feet. The others were staring at him astonished.

"Shut it off, will you! Shut it off!"

HESHIFER let his thoughts ramble. There were so many ways of playing the present situation—of taking advantage of the cumulative death-wish of mankind—that he wished he lived in a dozen worlds so he could try them all. For instance, they could seek to direct the death-wish at an outside enemy, by faking an invasion—not from Mars or Venus any more, but from one of Jupiter's moons or just the interstellar unknown. But that had been tried seventy-five years ago and it hadn't worked. Or desperate diseases justifying desperate remedies, they might attempt to divide the war forces into two groups that would fight each other. Or, better yet, get them to turn around and to conquer the rest of the world. But that, as bitter experience had shown, was as im-

possible as telepathy. Of course, he thought wistfully, there was always the Chaos Plan. Dangerous admittedly, and unpredictable, perhaps even ungovernable. But then, what wasn't? He wished they were at least prepared to employ it. Fortunately, it was beginning to look as if that necessity might never arise. The Sanity Scheme and the F'Sibr propaganda seemed to be working out. Still, plans were treacherous things. One never knew. F'Sibr trusted so completely in the idea that only society was crazy, that individuals were mainly sane and would recognize their insanity if properly propagandized. An attractive paradox, and possibly true. Well—F'Sibr and Sanity must have their day, but if they failed, then Heshifer and Chaos!

"I often wonder," mused M'Caslrai, looking across the desk, "what you're thinking about, Mister Heshifer, when you get that expression on your face."

As Heshifer took a moment to consider his reply, he wondered for the hundredth time of whom the World Director reminded him.

J'WILLOBE was lonely. Sometimes he felt horrible sure that of all men, he and he only had the slightest inkling of the myriad murderous conspiracies that were drawing their webs tighter and tighter around the world and him. A circle of malignant intellects, human and alien, surrounded the world and him and sent out tentacles. Their hostile thoughts exerted a tangible pressure. Everywhere you looked, there was evidence. Were the others blind fools, that they could not see? Whom could he really trust? Not even Inscra. Not even M'Caslrai. Of course those two seemed to have some superficial understanding of the threat to the war, ever since he

had demonstrated it so conclusively. M'Caslrai especially. But not even M'Caslrai would permit him to take such obvious steps as arresting Heshifer on suspicion. When it was plain to see, since Willisoun had disappeared while trailing Heshifer, that Heshifer must be in the plot. But M'Caslrai refused to see it and Heshifer went about his business unchecked. Well, let him! Let the others be blind! He, never more rightfully the Secretary of Dangers than now, had eyes enough for them all. And at least there were no longer any hindrances to his questionings of minor prisoners. When the emotion machines had done with them, when they had laughed and cried and feared and hated until they could no more, then they would talk. Then J'Wilobe would....

"I think I know what you're afraid of, Mister J'Wilobe," M'Caslrai said to him, smiling faintly. "But I also think I know how we're going to get around it when the time comes." He wagged his finger, desisting when he saw the expression in J'Wilobe's eyes.

BENEATH the surface, things were not going well with the war.

There were whispers. No one could say who started them, hardly even who repeated them. They were like the muttering voices the mind hears when it is drunk with fatigue. But they traveled. They did things.

A riot in an amusement area. A work-stoppage that left uncompleted triphibians roosting helplessly. At a training center, a veiledly mutinous refusal to undergo further death-tests, with the officers mainly intent on concealing the evidence of their own inefficiency. At a government center, open criticism of officials, mass protests, shocking accusations.

The burden of the whispers was always the same: That the war was being crookedly administered. That it had only been decided upon because M'Casrai's government was tottering. That death notices had gone only to those individuals whose independence and honesty made them a threat to the M'Casrai regime. That no actual friend of the M'Casrai regime had been chosen.

Facts and figures were adduced to prove this. Individuals were named. Everyone was supplied with a ready made personal grievance.

There grew a spirit of negativism, of smoldering resentment, of cynical disbelief in the whole fabric of society. There were sly sneers, spasms of sudden rage, guarded questionings of things held most sacred, deadly accusing glances.

Rehabilitation centers for deviants filled, overflowed. The same thing happened to the temporary detention centers and the unpublicized dungeons. Closely guarded orders went out: "Except for ringleaders, no more arrests...."

Along with the whispering, half masked by it, there went a more individualized form of psychological sabotage. It was as if, in the midst of a general barrage, a hidden sniper were picking preferred targets with a cold deliberation and slamming into their brains bullets of a far higher speed and greater destructiveness—mental bullets.

Here a moral expert fell foaming with convulsions in the midst of an address, later opened dazed eyes that doubted everything. There a communications specialist began surreptitiously to play with the tape-spools of his trade—pile them up in toy skylons. Elsewhere an actuary was found working out statistically detailed plans for the complete destruction of

human life throughout the solar system and the erasing of all signs of its presence.

An empty-eyed officer at a training center recorded for teletaction an announcement beginning: "A token plan has been adopted. Death candidates desiring discharge will report to...." Before the announcement was killed, it was seen by dozens. When questioned, the horror-stricken officer could only recall that, just before going to sleep the previous evening, he had seen rhythmically bobbing lights, heard a drowsy insistent voice.

A police official woke in the night and listened in terror and relief to a voice which told him that his crushing sense of guilt was merely due to a submerged memory of the many times he had imagined the death of his father.

A minor executive looked up with drug-filled eyes and asked: "Are we saviors.....or murderers? Are wesane?"

A billion throats threatened to take up that most dreaded question, until it became a scream heard around the world.

GRADUALLY the forces opposing the war drew even with those furthering it, until they teetered in precarious balance.

At Supracenter M'Casrai rose and surveyed his secretaries. His head was bowed, as if the skull, molding the tired flesh in its image, were made of lead.

"Gentlemen," he said, "a greater strength than ours is needed. We must ask guidance of omniscient, omnipotent Man." There was a murmur of agreement. "Dark teleconclaves for that purpose must immediately be called throughout the world. We here, as well as the rest, must join in supplication, ourselves to ourselves."

Across the round table, Heshifer smiled inwardly. This was a moment he had been waiting for.

At the appointed conclave time, the smile appeared openly on Heshifer's face. Sitting alone in his office in the Deep Mental Lab, he made certain trifling adjustments to a small instrument on his desk. Then he slipped on his telemask.

He erased the smile as the black velvet mouths of the mask settled snugly over his eyes, nose, and lips, swung back and covered his ears. Leisurely he pulled on his telegloves. Thus equipped, he could exercise his senses and manipulate objects through electronic counterpart-hands at any place in the world, or off it, where a teletactive unit existed. He could consult tapes in any library, savor a beverage in Africa, sign his name to a document on the moon, or strangle a man on Mars.

He could function in any properly equipped assembly chamber anywhere.

Or, as would happen now, he could functionally assemble with a hundred others in a chamber no bigger than an egg. In such a dark teleconclave, which in some ways resembled an ancient multi-way telephone call, the electronic micro-counterparts of each participant would be brought together at a central point, according to any chosen assembly pattern, and the resultant images faithfully transmitted back to each participant.

Plunged in soothing darkness, though still perfectly aware that he was sitting at his desk, Heshifer waited. Then, like white masks, other faces floated into view. Gradually the assembly pattern became clear—a sphere of closely-packed inward-turned faces.

He recognized J'Wilobe, Inscra, and other high executives and super-

visors. Automatically his mind ticked off: paranoia, catatonia, melancholia, cosmic shock, dictatoria, ethical monomania, omniscientia, newsman's psychosis, creative paralysis, hypertrophic realism, commissaria, permanent escapism, Manism, negatimania, the Venusoid delusion, and dementia praecox.

Then he saw M'Casrai, and his mind ticked off a question mark.

The conclave was complete.

Counterpart-hand grasped neighboring counterpart-hand, linking the elements of the sphere.

There was a feeling of primal pulsation, as if they were the inward-peering walls of a life-cell swimming in dark immensity.

Then, like the nucleus of such a cell, something pale and pinkish-sallow began to materialize at the central point toward which all eyes were directed.

A reverently mellow voice spoke, "Oh Man, Manipulator of Destiny, from our trouble we appeal to you." And they all repeated, "Oh Man, hear our voice."

The central mistiness grew denser, became the forms of a man and woman of matchless beauty, an eternal Adam and Eve.

HESHIFER, like everyone else, knew that these forms were teletactive projections from taped recordings. Religious doctrine, however, hinted that the forms were influenced by the worshippers' ideals.

"Oh Man, Shaper of Earth and Scaler toward Heaven, give us of your inexhaustible wisdom and strength."

The central couple, heads proudly upheld, smiled faintly and distantly, like gods riding on the clouds. Their flesh glowed with an inward radiance, lighting the faces around them.

"Oh Man, grant our desires."

There was to Heshifer something inexpressibly distasteful about this self-worship, this adulation of the species, this slobbering over the image in the mirror. When the voices chorused, it was like fish mouths opening and shutting around a central bait. He took advantage of the flurry of religious fervor to withdraw one of his hands from the web, maneuvering the hand that gripped it to grip instead two free fingers of his other hand.

"We have wandered in darkness, because we did not keep your image in our hearts."

"We erred because we forgot you."

A feeling of cozy and ego-inflating security began to enfold the worship cell. Heshifer withdrew his free hand from its teleglove and touched the instrument on his desk.

"You grant us leadership, and we are in danger."

"You gave us the helm and now storms threaten."

But something had begun to happen to the central figures—though the change was so slight that anyone but Heshifer might have thought it merely a trick of the mind. The glorious forms seemed to stoop a little, there was the barest suggestion of a slouch. The faces shortened and bulked out a trifle. Something sullied infinitesimally the radiance of the flesh. Heshifer smiled gently and continued the adjustments.

"Oh Man, Perfectest of All Things, Apex of Evolution's Pyramid, without whom the universe would be only death and dead matter...."

Imperceptibly the change was progressing. The two hairlines were creeping downward and a certain sporadic dark downiness had become apparent. The slouch was definite, the hands reached for the knees. The features were pouting together, thrusting for-

ward a little with a petulant air.

"You who are the Breath of all Beauty, Sensitive and Delicate beyond compare...."

And now there was a slight change in the leading voice too. It was still mellow and profound, impeccably so, but one fancied irony rather than reverence. Though that too might merely have been a matter of mood.

Moving only his eyes, Heshifer surveyed the inward wall of faces. Some of them looked definitely worried—and trying to conceal it. That was good.

"You who are the Crown of Life, the Priceless Ornament of Existence, matchless in grace...."

And now the trend of the change in the two central figures was obvious. The slouch had become a stoop-shouldered slump. Legs had shortened and bowed. Hands had reached knees and seemed inclined to go beyond. The sporadic downiness had become ever-thickening hairy patches. More and more obviously it was becoming an ape-man and his bride squatting in darkness, squinting surlily.

PRACTICALLY every one of the inward-peering faces seemed to be trying to hide worry now. More than worry—disgust and fear. So far as Heshifer could judge, each thought that only he could see the imperfection of the vision—and feared that the imperfection was a mirroring of his own secret and unclean thoughts—and so tried not to show it.

He felt one electronic grasp on his counterpart-hand tighten conclusively, then guiltily slacken.

"Being without Flaw, Paragon of Gentleness and Humility...."

The male figure gave its consort a shove, then smirked and thumped its chest. The color of the light had changed. It was becoming reddish,

murky, flickering—a wood fire's glow. The surrounding darkness was that of a soot-blackened cave.

"You who have transcended the animals and are above all gross things...."

Both figures were now peering downward with great interest, and scratching.

"You whose thoughts trend always heavenward, whose eyes are fixed on the stars...."

The male caught something, inspected it minutely, then snapped it between horny fingernails. The female craned her neck curiously.

Heshifer rejoiced. The inward-peering faces looked sick and sweating as they strove to maintain the pretense. Obviously their value-scales were shaking at the foundation. It was working out better than he ever had hoped. He'd never dreamed he'd be able to let it go this far.

But, he noted suddenly, there was an exception. All the faces showed smothered disgust and horror and shame—except one.

M'Caslrai's dark-ringed eyes were gazing tranquilly at the two ape-creatures with an expression that could only be interpreted as compassion and tenderness. It was as if the spirit behind the gaunt homely face reached out and embraced even these lowly beings, or as if he understood that this too was the nature of man.

The sense of a resemblance to some other and well-known personality was so strong that Heshifer swore that in a moment he'd remember who. But he didn't.

Never had the secret of M'Caslrai's personality seemed so close—or so far.

Heshifer's mood changed abruptly, from one of exulting confidence to gnawing doubt. Somehow, what he saw in M'Caslrai's face took away

all his certainty of success.

Abruptly he came to a decision on a matter to which he had not given a thought all day.

F'Sibr or no, he would prepare the Chaos Plan.

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS Embarkation Day. In a score of great harbors around the world, the fleet rode at anchor. The tiny Martian and Venusian contingents had arrived; their opalescently space-weathered hulls stood out from the rest. The robot barges bearing the vast stores were already at sea, waiting.

In each hull, robot or man-carrying, even in the smallest auxiliary launches and fliers, was a disintegrative core keyed to a master detonator aboard the fleet flag-triphibian *Finality*.

All was ready, and on the surface all was well. But below the surface....

There was mutiny aboard a quarter of the triphibians. It was being temporized with. Elsewhere, mutiny was close to the surface.

Extraordinary rumors were surging about. Perhaps the chief one was that a "token" war plan involving no human deaths was being forced through Supracenter by M'Caslrai himself. Another was that the war forces would be called upon to wipe out rebellious civilians, destroy all the old cities.

Chaplains hurried about, nervously invoking man to remain true to his divine self, calling on him to meet without flinching the supreme enemy Death.

Scattered companies of women's volunteers made hysterical attempts to desert and were forcibly confined to their quarters.

All over the world there was open demand for the dissolution of the M'Casrai government, the abandonment of the war, and the immediate return home of death noticees.

A powerful civilian's committee, organized overnight, had presented Supracenter with an ultimatum.

And Supracenter did not act. It made no move to crush the mounting rebelliousness. It stayed behind locked doors. No one knew what was going on behind those doors, but from the cracks around them a miasma of weakness welled.

Everywhere there was an extraordinary atmosphere of nervous tension. People cringed, as if fearful that each increase of pressure would set off a universal scream. There was a wild, glorious joyfulness at the idea of stopping the war and saving fifty million lives. At the same time there were waves of guilt at the thought of the reckless daring of the course that was being taken, the blasphemous flaunting of a century's profoundest rituals. And there were recurrent gusts of the early irrational fear of an unknown enemy who would swoop down suddenly out of space.

These opposed feelings beat against each other, drove each other higher and higher, toward an inevitable climax.

And still Supracenter did not act.

SPRUCE IN his pearly dress uniform, Norm stood on the dress bridge of the fleet flagphib *Finality* and looked across the harbor toward the city. Norm had the unnerving feeling that his mind was a sounding board for the confused emotions of humanity—each breath of hope, each blast of guilt. So he tried to keep his mind empty, occupied—not with rehearsing the part he must play in the Fleet Teletaction Room when the

crisis came, for he knew that by heart—but with trivial things.

Nature had done her best here to make it a gala Departure Day. One hardly noticed the dark cloudbank to the west. Sunlight glittered on the blue wavelets, shimmered on the silvery hulls of the massed triphibians.

They crowded the harbor, their sleek shapes making them seem like a school of giant silver whales—or the gods of whales.

Tiny, gleamingly uniformed figures thronged the dress bridges, structures which could be retracted for aerial, submarine, or extraterrestrial operations.

Fliers and copters darted about.

Beyond the great silverbacks, the ugly walls of the Old City loomed. But beyond those, dwarfing them, lost in the blue haze, shot up the fairy pinnacles of the New City—midmost the golden shaft of Supracenter, drawing the gaze toward the blinding sky and so back to the bridge in a track paralleling the palisade of storm clouds to the west.

Behind him he glimpsed a group hurrying into the Fleet Command Room—Fleet Commander Z'Kafir, Flagphib Commander Sline, and Fleet Communications Officer F'Sibr among them. They exuded an air of portentous secrecy.

He saw J'Quilvens slipping past them in the opposite direction, trim in her Liaison Officer's uniform. He tried to catch her imp's candles of eyes, but failed. He felt a sharp irrational pang of uneasiness and guilt.

Looking toward Supracenter, he noted a silver sliver projecting from its peak; also an increase in the number of clustering fliers. Then his glance wavered as lightning winked from the approaching storm wall to the west. But his mind did not analyze these impressions.

J'Quilvens had made him think of Allisoun. He pictured her as he'd seen her yesterday—in tears at his departure. Poor kid, he'd treated her rottenly, strutting before her, taking advantage of her hysterical affection, while all the time he didn't care a stick for her.

She had not gloated over their relationship, as he had cynically predicted, gloried in being a doomed man's lover. She hadn't wanted him to die; she'd clung to him.

Of course there was his feeling toward J'Quilvens, but that only made his behavior toward Allisoun worse.

A fine way for a world-savior to act toward a girl who was only trying to make him happy!

The silver sliver had lengthened a trifle, and the fliers had clustered thicker yet—or else there were other tinier shapes among them. Again lightning flickered, and there came a growl of thunder.

At the very least, he shouldn't have taken such cruel pleasure in her grief, especially when he knew that if all went well he was not going to die. Of course, he couldn't very well have revealed any plans to her, but at least he could have let drop a hint, given her a ray of hope.

And he'd killed her brother, or helped kill him, and then gotten a kick out of her innocent worries over his absence. Willisoun had been a spy and murderer, had deserved to die, but still that didn't justify his own nasty hypocrisy.

THE SILVER sliver was obviously much longer than it had seemed at first. The fact that it was directed toward the harbor had foreshortened it. And still it lengthened. The tinier shapes seemed to be gathered in tiers around it, and there was a suggestion of movement on the roofs of the Old

City. This time the thunder was accompanied by some other solemn rumbling.

It was the same with his parents. They weren't the selfish Philistines he had pictured them, they were just a little scared man and woman trying to do their best in a jumbled world. They hadn't deserved his bitter contempt, to be treated as ridiculous buffoons. He remembered his father's handclasp and choked voice, his mother's sobs.

Whatever the silver sliver was, it was directed like a serpent's neck or the arm of a giant crane, from Supra-center's summit out over the agitated roof of the Old City. The perplexing aerial tiers seemed to be lengthening with it, flanking it on either side. The rumble had become a steady roll, in which the intermittent western thunder joined. There was a suggestion that the flashes of lightning from the encroaching storm were somehow being answered from the city. There was a hint of martial music, a sudden flurry of movement on the bridges of the farther triphibians.

How could he ever have been so rotten to treat them that way? All of a sudden Norm had the horrible feeling that he was no longer a man cleaving to a dangerous course but a boy caught misbehaving, a juvenile delinquent. He had sneered at his elders, disobeyed, broken the rules, joined a forbidden gang, would be punished. Against all logic, this disgustingly childish fear persisted. He remembered old scenes—times he had rebelled, been "talked to", been forced to recant his boyhood heresies.

A sudden swell in the martial music exploded this dark train of reverie. Like a man waking from a dream, he took his hands from the rail, moved backward a step, looked up.

He knew that something was hap-

pening around him, something critical involving the fleet, the city, the world. And yet, like a man still half in a dream, he couldn't comprehend what it was.

The sense of fear crystalized to an icy lump.

The silver something arching out from Suprcenter was a delicate aerial pontoon bridge, supported by flying components, as it extended itself questingly over the farther triphibians, swaying gently from side to side like a silver serpent's head. There were human figures on it, and the tiers flanking it in the air were made up of human figures too, though how they were supported he couldn't understand. The uniformed mites on the more distant dress bridges were drawing themselves up in ranks. And from the same direction there began to come a steady, frantic cheering, keeping up through the music and the thunderous drumming, building toward a titanic shout.

Z'Kafir, Sline, and the rest of the staff poured suddenly from the Fleet Command Room. He half expected F'Sibr to address him. But he was brushed by.

There was a running to and fro, a barking of orders. He found himself lining up with the others. He looked around stupidly, realized he was in the first rank.

He saw the women's volunteers lining up, J'Quilvens among them. He heard the flagphib's orchestra join in the general heart-quickenning din.

He saw the aerial bridge reaching downward toward the *Finality*.

And then, at last, he became aware of the whispered word running up and down the ranks. His numbed mind patched together the phrases into the single hope-shattering story.

M'Casirai and his entire secretariat were joining the fleet. They would

share in its destruction. This was their answer to the civilian's ultimatum.

DULLY HE looked at the approaching bridge. Already he thought he could identify some of the figures.

The flanking tiers, he saw now, were teletacted images of people from all over the world, come to witness and applaud Suprcenter's sacrifice.

Music, drumroll, and thunder and cheering had now become ear-splitting. Great, unopposable waves of emotion were rolling down from Suprcenter across the harbor.

The black storm wall, grown mountain high, had reached the western shore. Lightning flashes played from it and were answered by the electric guns of the fleet, salvoing salutes. But the aerial bridge was still in bright sunlight, backgrounded by blue.

Norm felt the presence of a giant ghostly figure—Man the God, standing behind the storm wall and peering down over it in divine approval.

A telescoped silver gangplank shot upward from the *Finality*, linked with the aerial bridge. Slowly the group of figures started down, acknowledging the homage of the world's massed teleported ranks.

But for Norm the scene drew in. As they came closer, he failed to note that some of M'Casirai's companions did not share their leader's sad, tranquil satisfaction—that some faces even showed stunned amazement and dry-lipped horror. He had eyes only for one man.

It was as if he and M'Casirai were alone at the ends of a long but shortening corridor.

This was the man he could not face, the living symbol of paternalistic authority down the ages.

His sense of guilt grew beyond all

sane proportion. He told himself that M'Caslrai had come to reprimand him, that M'Caslrai would halt before him and with fatherly sternness denounce him as a traitor, that he would be forced to go down on his knees and beg the world's forgiveness.

It was unfair, he protested to himself. M'Caslrai was only a teletacted speechmaker, a signature on world directives, a thought atop Supracenter. He had no right to come down and face you in the flesh.

M'Caslrai stepped onto the bridge. The tumult reached its climax. It seemed to Norm that the big, gaunt man was walking straight toward him. He wanted to run, to plunge through the deck, to be snatched into the sky, to hurl himself at M'Caslrai and strangle him.

He only stood there licking his lips, trembling.

M'Caslrai looked at him once, closely, then passed by.

AT THE FIRST possible moment, while the salutes were still thundering the triphibians out of harbor, Heshifer told F'Sibr how the whole maneuver had been engineered by M'Caslrai alone, had come as a complete surprise to practically everyone of the secretariat, himself included.

"And now, the Chaos Plan," he finished.

F'Sibr hesitated, shook his head. "We still have almost a week. Perhaps, all appearances to the contrary, they have played into our hands. Very likely M'Caslrai is contemplating a last minute escape. But whether he is or not, does not matter. We shall see that he escapes—with publicity enough to brand him as a cheat forever. We have the *Unseen*. It will kidnap M'Caslrai and the other higher-ups, including yourself. It will be handled in such a way as to look like

deliberate flight—you will help see to that."

Heshifer frowned.

F'Sibr threw up his hands. "Then, if that fails, you can have your way. The Chaos Plan is ready. It would take only a word."

Heshifer thought. "How many besides the officers of the *Unseen* will have to be in on the plot," he asked.

"My aide Norm. Perhaps one or two more."

Heshifer looked up. "You're sure you can depend on him?"

"Absolutely."

After a pause Heshifer nodded unwillingly.

"We have five days," said F'Sibr.

CHAPTER VII

FOR THREE days the fleet had driven across calm seas, slowly, at not a tithe of its real speed, a parade of silver hearses. For three days the death tension had mounted.

The time had come when men began to see visions, hear faint whisperings in the air, feel the touch of currents from beyond life.

Alone on the dress bridge, Norm stared at the sunset. The sun was an arched furnace door on the horizon, the sea a metallic expanse. Astern curved the triphibian battle line, a succession of diminishing silver teardrops, until they were lost in the dusky easter blue. Ahead some of the scouts could be seen, fanned out expectantly, as if death might make a premature attack. No sound, save the slightest hiss of displaced waters.

It seemed to Norm that his mind quested over all the sea's brazen plain, without finding a place to rest. There was only the feeling of the grandeur of the fleet, the sense of a proudly onrushing destiny, the suggestion of supernatural wings hover-

ing overhead—and those were the last things he wanted to feel.

He remembered the plan for tonight, but his mind veered quickly.

Perhaps if he sent his mind still farther....to the rim....beyond...

M'Caslrai stood beside him, black elbows on the rail.

Norm's heart jumped, thumped, quieted.

For a while they leaned side by side, watching the sea.

"Maybe a man can find peace out there," said M'Caslrai. "Leastways he can look for it."

A pause. "We're all looking for peace, Mister Norm."

Another pause. Then softly, "You've a girl back there, you told me. What did you say she was called?"

He repeated "Allisoun" thoughtfully after Norm. "And there'll be a child? He will bear your name, I suppose, if a boy. Well, Man willing, he will not have to suffer what you suffer. We may hope that your sacrifice will bear fruit, that in the future the world will take the course of wisdom."

He turned his sorrowful tranquil eyes on Norm. "I feel very small and very troubled," he said. "It is not easy to bow to necessity, to see the few doomed for the sake of the many."

Norm started to speak, mumbled an unintelligible word.

"I'm glad I'm going with you," said M'Caslrai.

The moment passed, was lost with the last blinding sliver of sun. Gloom raced across the sea.

"Tell me, Mister Norm," M'Caslrai asked, "are you troubled?"

Norm hesitated, shook his head.

M'Caslrai nodded, smiled, moved away.

For a moment Norm's mind was

numb. Then loneliness rushed in, as if he and M'Caslrai were the only two beings in the world and had parted forever.

He felt giddy, as if the sea were suddenly tilting, as if all his intentions and beliefs were swinging on the bob of a gigantic pendulum.

He looked along the rail to where, unapproachable now, the World Director still stared over the sea.

It's true, he thought. I've always run away from him. All my attitudes have been shaped by fear that, if I ever listened to him, he would persuade me.

It's unfair, something childish inside him reiterated bitterly. He has no right to come down from his pedestal and meet you face to face like an ordinary man. If only he wouldn't, it would be so easy to be true to the others.

But he has come down, the adult reminded. And now there are certain thoughts that you must think, even though each one sears your ego like a red hot iron.

He is great and wise and compassionate. You can see it in his face, hear it in every word he utters.

He thinks only of mankind, and of what must be, if mankind is to go on.

Whereas you and the others, even F'Sibr and Heshifer, are selfish and petty, thinking only of criticism and troublemaking and cynical jibing. You seek to sabotage the great current of history which he guides.

You are crackpot dreamers, one more lunatic fringe trying to pretend that what is, is not. He is a realist. He is right and what he does is right.

The world has always been a horrible place and has exacted horrible sacrifices of humanity. Sanity consists in recognizing the necessity of those sacrifices. *He* is the sane one.

FACES FLOATED before Norm in the gleaming dusk. Faces he knew. Only now F'Sihr looked like a cruel Eastern god, a paranoid who thought he could change the course of history by his personal fiat; Heshifer, a senile mischief-maker, mouth and mind atwilt with fantastic schemes or brutal jests; J'Quilvens, an hysteric trembling on the verge of laughter or screams. Behind them, a pale-faced horde of deviants and discontents. For a moment they all leered at him, snickered. Then they wavered, faded, and were blotted out by the visage of M'Caslrai — profound-eyed, understanding, earthy but rising above it, gaunt and homely, infinitely kind.

All Norm's confused and often-denied religious impulses urged, "He is the One. He is Man!"

He felt the mighty presence of the fleet, the comradeship of the millions marked and trained for death. Through the silver hulls and the dusk and the faint hiss of the waves, that comradeship tugged at and captured his heart.

Feeling that his whole life had only been a preparation for this moment, he turned and followed the rail.

"Sir," he began.

M'Caslrai's "Yes?" was the friendliest of whispers.

"There is a grave threat to the safety of the fleet and the success of the whole expedition."

M'Caslrai nodded wearily, as if he had known all along. His gaze did not leave the sea.

Norm swallowed. He said, "Before I go on, I want your promise that those I betray will not be killed or hurt, only held where they can do no harm until it's all over. Also, I do not want my part in this to become known."

M'Caslrai looked at him. "You

have my promise, Mister Norm," he said.

LATER THAT night all the searchbeams of the *Finality* flared out suddenly. For a quarter mile around the flagphib it was bright as day. For yards below the water was milky green.

At first nothing was seen except the towering blunt muzzle of the triphibian next in line.

Then a fine white cloud shot out from the flagphib. It vanished swiftly, but left in its wake a small, bone-white ship grappled to the dress bridge, with a number of similarly white figures swarming aboard the *Finality*.

An order was shouted. The figures hesitated. Some of them turned back.

A blue flicker of small-arms fire cut them down. The ports of the ghost ship were slammed, and in a rainstorm of blue rays it dove like a frightened fish.

Light and explosions pursued it, sending the emerald water in great chunks.

Rocket-tubes blasting, it shot up suddenly into the air, frantically twisting and turning.

The big beams of the *Finality* caught it. The hull glowed red.... white....

Spinning out of control, it fell like a meteor. There was a great hiss as it plunged for a last time into the sea.

CHAPTER VIII

LATE THE next night Norm stood for a third time on the dress bridge. No lights betrayed the hissing triphibians. They went stealthily as murderers. And yet he sensed the mighty hulls, the millions of sleepless souls cramming them, the incalculably

numerous robot barges, all converging on the dawn rendezvous.

But they no longer awakened thoughts of a proud destiny. He could only think of the cylindrical cores and of the disintegratives that packed them.

The sharp sense of reality and duty that had inspired him last night, was gone. The sense of guilt that had lifted after his confessions, had returned intensified. He remembered the white-hot plunge of the *Unseen*, the hiss of steam. His emotions were frozen, but not numbed. The night might have been black ice encasing him.

That afternoon a sailor had jumped overboard. A watchful dingy had recovered him, although he had done his best to drown. Later he had pleaded to be killed at once and spared the waiting for tomorrow.

Now Norm kept seeing his frantic, babbling face.

He wondered if he should not have insisted on being imprisoned with F'Sibr and the rest, without revealing that he was the informer.

But he knew he could not have kept the secret in their presence, or endured their reproaches when he confessed.

Well, at any rate, M'Casrai had kept faith. There was something incredibly honest and noble about the man, something that still bound Norm to him by cords of awe, although in all other respects he had come to regret his action so bitterly that he dared not think about it.

If only he could go back.... But it was too late now to do anything. The kidnap ship was destroyed.

Of course, he could make some wild effort. There were still the subordinate agents on the other ships. He could....

But a complete paralysis of will power held him helpless. He knew, for example, that in the War Room be-

hind him was the master switch which would disintegrate the fleet at dawn. But if it had been just at his elbow, and if a child had been pressing it down, he could have done nothing to stop it.

Like some guilt-tortured prophet of olden times, he stared into the darkness, looking for a sign.

IN THE utter blackness of the brig, though in the gibberish of code-speech, F'Sibr said calmly, "No, I am the one to blame, if we have to talk about blame. I stubbornly persisted when it was obvious that our whole counterprogram had failed. I clutched at the straw of the kidnap plot. And I trusted Normsi."

"That's not your fault," interjected J'Quilvens, "I was the one who introduced Normsi in the first place."

"Irrelevant. The point is...."

"Two-thirty," came the toneless voice of an agent named Wavel, who possessed the best sense of time among them.

"The point is," F'Sibr continued, "that I trusted Normsi, even when Heshifer had doubts. It was an unforgivable executive error."

"But when it comes to that, we aren't absolutely sure that it was Normsi who betrayed us," J'Quilvens urged doubtfully.

"The probabilities all lie in that direction."

"For that matter, we cannot even be sure that the kidnap plot has failed."

F'Sibr did not trouble to answer. They could hear the coded whispers of the two agents conversing at the other end of the brig.

"There must be something we can do," said J'Quilvens.

"Yes," said F'Sibr. "We could have adopted the Chaos Plan four days ago. Unfortunately, my opinion carried too much weight." He paused,

as if expecting a comment from Heshifer. When none came, he continued, "True, the plan is fully prepared, but all agents are under the strictest orders to wait for word from above."

"But don't you think some of them will go ahead with it, against orders, at the last minute. Unless they've all been unmasked too?"

"That is unlikely. Normsi was acquainted only with those of us who are here—a fact which incidentally constitutes further evidence against him."

"It's odd, in that case," mused J'Quilvens, "that we haven't been asked to reveal the identity of the agents on the other ships—given a taste of J'Wilobe's persuasion. They must know there are more than us."

"It is odd," agreed F'Sibr. "There was something peculiar about the whole business of our being caught—I mean, the way it was done. I sense M'Casrai's touch, rather than J'Wilobe's, although it's outside M'Casrai's line."

"Right!" Heshifer's unexpected comment sounded as if he were following a very different line of thought, which the conversation had only chanced to intersect. When he said nothing more, J'Quilven's pressed, "But granting the others are free, mayn't they go ahead with the Chaos Plan?"

"Yes, but it won't do any good. The fleet explosives are all keyed to the master switch aboard the *Finality*. Every smallest unit of the fleet, down to the dingies, are cored with explosives which it would take hours, in some case days, to remove or unkey. At the time of detonation, the water itself will be deadly for miles around. Everything hinged on our seizing control of the *Finality* and preventing the master switch from being thrown. Without that, minor successes are futile."

"Then there's nothing we can do?"

"Well.... I am trying to think of something, as we all are."

"Of course. But you don't think much of our chances?"

Again F'Sibr did not reply.

WHEN J'QUILVENS next spoke, she seemed to be trying to push back the darkness. "Then, to keep up our spirits, we have only the hope that when the next war comes, our survivors will be wiser, will iorge a sounder counterprogram?"

"No!" said F'Sibr. For once his voice was sharp, though still even and well modulated. "We do not have that hope. It would be childish to assume so. It has become clear that the world's insanity has reached its crisis. If we had adopted the Chaos Plan, we might have been able to make use of that crisis—the crisis a gun, the Chaos Plan a trigger. But we failed. The moment will not come again. After the crisis, the slow mental degeneration sets in. When the next war comes, our weakened organization will adopt an even more futile and unrealistic program. The war will be greater, as the often-indulged death-wish intensifies. It is to such a future that we must calmly look ahead, if we are to behave as realistic adults. Any other future is as impossible as...." He chuckled icily as he invoked Heshifer's favorite comparison, "...as telepathy."

A shiver seemed to go through the darkness. It infected J'Quilven's voice. "And yet, you continue to speak in code? Why do you do that, if you know that everything's hopeless?"

"There is such a thing as honoring a lost cause."

This time there was no doubting the shiver. Then cutting across it, came Heshifer's excited words.

"We must contact Normsi!"

The anticlimax provided by this ri-

diculous statement was so great that J'Quilvens had to choke back hysterical laughter.

"We know the boy," Heshifer sped on. "We know he's no planted traitor. He must have been subjected to extraordinary psychological pressure—and through M'Caslrai. He's a cyclic type. By now, surely, he's regretting it . . . wavering . . . waiting for a push."

F'Sibr's reply was ominously gentle, almost soothing. "I'll grant you there is a chance that Norm's behavior has followed some such course. Though in that case the probability is that he is under as close guard as ourselves and in no position to do anything even if he does have a change of heart. But . . ." His voice became doubly cautious ". . . you spoke of contacting him? I don't quite see . . ."

"Right!" replied Heshifer, so eagerly, so enthusiastically even, that you couldn't help visualizing his grinning, grimacing face, his darting eyes. "Like you, I have been thinking—about how to contact Normsi. I have eliminated all reasonable possibilities, except one—the most unlikely. Something that we have no evidence for, although we have looked for it for decades. But since, no matter how unlikely, it is the only reasonable possibility, we *must* if we are logical, employ it. Telepathy."

There was a pause. "Are you forgetting, 'as impossible as Telepathy'?" said F'Sibr. "We might as well try black magic."

"Call it the least impossible of the impossibilities, then! Remember, telepathy may depend on the electrical potential of the nervous system. Think of how great the potential must be at a moment like this. Suppose that our receiver, Normsi, is wavering . . . his mind a blank. Call it anything you like! Call it my last foolish tribute to a lost cause! I, at any rate, shall try."

"And I," said F'Sibr softly after a moment. He was echoed.

Suddenly Heshifer laughed—a rich unlikely laugh.

"Excuse me," he said. "But I just happened to realize of whom M'Caslrai reminds me. It is astounding I never thought of it before. It explains the nature of M'Caslrai's insanity, too. It's not who he is, but who he *thinks* he is. If I'd only realized it before! What I couldn't have done with the man! I've been blind as a bat . . ."

"Two forty-five," said Wavel.

J'WILOBE sat alone before the executive panel in the Flagship Security Room next to the brig. His face was more pinched than ever. His jewel-bright eyes kept looking from side to side. An hour ago he had dismissed all the guards and multiply locked the door behind them, and the doors of the two vestibules as well. He had become suspicious. True, he had always trusted the guards before, but now the universe had become a shadow world populated by slinking plotters, and he the lone sentry on the wall.

Of course, as he logically recognized, such a situation couldn't go on indefinitely. But he only had to hold out until dawn, and then he would be relieved forever from his crushing burdens. Unless there were another life . . . But that would be too horrible.

He frowned at the massive circular door of the brig, and decided once and for all that he no longer trusted M'Caslrai. Why had M'Caslrai refused to let him eliminate these danger-mongers, at least question them? Why had he refused to tell him the reasons for their arrest when it was obviously a matter for the Secretariat of Dangers? Even the warning about a possible attack by an invisible ship

hadn't come until a few minutes before the occurrence.

Of course he had advised M'Caslrai to arrest Heshifer months ago, had warned him against F'Sibr. But that couldn't be the reason, because M'Caslrai had ignored his proposals.

No, the World Director must have some private source of information. Either he had organized an inner spy-system, or had suborned some of J'Wilobe's own men, or was protecting an informer.

Well, at all events, no one but J'Wilobe knew the present combination to the door of the brig, and he could destroy all life inside it at the touch of a finger. Whatever risky or even traitorous course M'Caslrai might be taking, those in the brig were out of the picture.

At the thought J'Wilobe felt a rush of self-confidence, so exhilarating and intense that he sat there trembling. He suddenly *knew* that whatever threat arose tonight he would be equal to it. It was as if a cloak of invulnerability had been dropped around his shoulders, masking even his one great hidden weakness—the one he dared not even think about, let alone give an outsider a chance of guessing.

There would be threats tonight, yes—he was curiously sure of that—but he would master them.

He looked around the Security Room. It was as neat and metallic as his mind.

He was immune to assault. No one could even telecontact the room or the inner vestibule, except from the fortified outer vestibule.

The panel before him would inform him of any movements in the restricted areas of the *Finality*. But J'Wilobe had the illusion of a strange clairvoyant extension of his senses that made the panel seem ridiculously crude by comparison. He felt he could sense at once the slightest hostile

movement anywhere aboard the ship, throughout the world—even respond to to faintest inimical scratching on the skin of the space-time cosmos.

A light glowed violet, indicating that someone had entered the outer vestibule.

To J'Wilobe it was as if a long-awaited chess-game had begun. Someone had moved pawn to king's fourth.

HE INSTANTLY whipped on his telemask and was functionally present in the outer vestibule. His hand-counterparts closed on sidearms conveniently present there.

At first glance there seemed to be no one. Suspecting an invisible man, he prepared to criss-cross the walls with fire.

Then he saw a hand on the table.

Someone had made an impossible move with a knight.

Just a gloved hand.

Or was it merely a glove, retaining the shape of the hand that had dropped it?

No, it moved. The fingers drummed—or was the hand starting to walk?

It made a fist. Then the forefinger pointed—first away, then swinging it toward him.

Conscious of a greater pang of terror than he had ever known in his life, J'Wilobe found himself back in the Security Room. It spoke well for his courage that moments later, just as the blue light glowed, his was projecting himself into the inner vestibule.

The hand was there. Without hesitating, he directed a needle beam at it. The hand writhed at the touch of the fiery ray, seemed to crumple, then jerked aside—and pointed at him.

Someone had sacrificed a knight.

By a supreme effort of will, he managed for a moment to continue his fire. The hand recoiled, but kept pointing.

Back in the Security Room, he found the hand ahead of him. He tried to pick up a sidearm, but his fingers could not grasp. He lunged toward the control that would flick death through the brig.

But the pointing hand wagged a little, as if to say "No".

The hand looked hurt. Three fingers dangled. They seemed to be crushed.

Perhaps the wagging was only a wounded shaking. But it continued.

J'Wilobe dropped back from the death control.

Someone had played, "Queen takes pawn. Check."

The hand pointed commandingly toward the door of the brig.

J'Wilobe was not conscious of the sting of the sweat running down into his eyes—only that the blur it produced was insufficient to dissolve the hand.

He took a step toward the door.

A part of his mind had analyzed what had happened. The hand was a tele-counterpart, projected by someone who knew his hidden weakness. From the outer vestibule it had reprojected itself to the inner, and so to the Security Room. Now it was only the projection of a projection of a projection. Yet he had badly maimed the original—the impact of the ray had been transmitted.

But that part of his mind had not power over his actions. It was getting farther and farther away from his consciousness, like something fading toward the most distant star.

There was only enough room in his mind for the hand and the combination to the brig, and the former was pushing out the latter.

As he moved step by step toward the door, the moving finger seemed to press on his skull. Now it was a hand of steel, now of marble, now of fleshless bone, now of boneless flesh,

now a man's, now a woman's, now M'Casrai's, now Inscra's, now Heshifer's, now the fingers were serpent's heads with flickering tongues, now they were the red tongues themselves, now the forefinger was a crooked gun pointed at him, now a crushed but inching caterpillar, now a comet zig-zagging toward him through blackness . . . eventually all these faded and it became his father's hand, approaching to tickle him, apparently loving, actually cruel. Mind-destroying laughter twitched at his lips.

Checkmate!

The door opened, the finger poked through his skull, the laughter exploded . . . and then the whole world blacked out, and J'Wilobe realized that he had fallen millions of miles and landed in a cozy, velvet-lined cell where he could eternally play a thousand simultaneous blindfold chess games and win them all. With a calm happiness that he had never known before, he made his thousand first moves.

FROM THE stratospheric heights in which his flier idled, Aircscout Mardel overlooked the entire curved area of sea constituting the rendezvous. Rank after rank of triphibian and barge, spaced with geometrical precision except for the few lines of late arrivers. Albino soldier ants on a dark field.

Aircscout Mardel's features were the set, hopeless ones of a man who must meet an unvanquishable foe. Even if he had been the sort to consider desertion in battle, he knew that it was doubtful whether there was time enough left for the fastest flight to carry him beyond range of the general blast. And granting he escaped the general blast, there was the disintegrative charge buried in his flier—a relatively small one, but ample for its purpose. Moreover, there would be

the other fliers to reckon with. And then there was that omnipresent feeling of an unseen, unknown enemy who would surely engulf any man who straggled far.

The sky had been lightening for some time. Now a blinding chunk of sun shoved above the horizon. It occurred to Aircout Mardel that this was a sunrise which those below would not be privileged to watch.

He looked down again and frowned. He fancied there was a slight jumbling of the ships, a disorder in the ranks, the barest suggestion of a scattering. As if an invisible giant had thrust a stick toward the silver ants.

THE COMMANDER of the *Enterprise* looked around the Command Room. He was a florid, portly man. A glance at the panel showed him that everyone was at battle stations, ready for the event. The communications officer gave him a message. The commander read it twice. He began to laugh, softly at first, then in more and more joyful peals. The others edged away. He dropped the message and began to strip off his clothes. The navigation officer picked up the message and read, "The time has come for you to reveal yourself. The sign has appeared—the bloody star. Drop the mask. Speak!" He looked up uncomprehendingly. Naked, the captain strode out onto the dress bridge, crying, "I am Man! I am Man!" A bit of red glowed beside the doorway—it looked like a star-shaped jewel. Perhaps the communications officer had dropped it—he had come in that way. And now the communications officer was giving orders in a crisp voice.

Aboard the *Decision* order was given to gather in the mess room for religious service. Almost immediately it was followed by an order to return to battle stations. Then the first order

was repeated. Then the second. Again the first. Again the second. When the scrambling was at its most frantic, the executive officer turned up suddenly with a glowing knife and ran through the ship, slashing right and left.

Throughout the fleet, key men screamed at shadows, pawed at phantoms, smirked at the invisible. They listened to nonsensical messages whispered over teletactors and their limbs grew hysterically rigid. They glanced at a foolish picture and went blind. They were shown meaningless bric-a-brac and fell into convulsions. They closeted themselves briefly with teletactive messengers and came out unharmed—in body.

Panic was awakened in subordinates. Each man was a fuse exploding those below him. The thing was contagious, though here and there an oddly cool-headed few sought to stem the confusion—but only after it reached a peak.

The crew of the *Mortality* abandoned ship. Hundreds of men simply dropped overboard and swam away. Of the four officers who stayed in the control room, one was laughing, another cried, the third crouched horrified in a corner, the fourth was sunk in apathy. They were looking at something that dangled from the control panel.

There was fighting aboard the *Remote*. Just small arms, until someone ordered the big guns backfired to clear out the corridors. There was a giant flash and a shock wave that smashed a valley in the water. Then there were only the *Remote's* neighbors beaving on a giant swell caked with silver dust.

The *Ultimate* turned her guns on the *Infinity*, disintegrated her, then committed suicide.

The commander of the *Immortality* saw something through the forward

telescopes. What it was he would tell no one, but he ordered the forward guns fired into the western darkness and the ship itself sent full-speed ahead in pursuit. No one understood, but he was obeyed. He manifested extraordinary excitement as they blasted first into the air and then into outer space. Perhaps it was Death itself he thought he was attacking, for he muttered such things as, "That hurt him, boys! Look, he runs! But we'll track him down even if he lairs on Uranus! Watch out! —he's raised his sting!" He clung to the telescopes. The *Immortality* blasted away from the sun, toward the outer planets.

There was wild music aboard the *Farewell*. Red-daubed women and green-smeared men were dancing. Food was strewn, liquors sloshed. The drug lockers had been broken open. Someone had dragged out an emotion machine and was experimenting fantastically.

Aboard the *Nightfall* they prayed.

IT WAS AN hour when minds were jerked open like long-locked drawers and their dark contents blindly strewn. Secret ideas fumed like smoke, obscuring the face of reality. It was not the actual sky and sea, but a delirium of water and air. The paling stars were a paranoid's dream of grandeur. Only insanity was real.

In the Fleet Command Room of the *Finality*, Commander Sline had collapsed, but Fleet Commander Z'Kafir had the situation well in hand. His mind was clear and cool. He realized what had happened and saw exactly what must be done. But he was speaking at ten times his normal rate, and when he tried to indicate by gestures what must be done, his hands moved too fast to follow. This purely mechanical defect in his ability to communicate rendered all his brilliant ideas useless.

General Secretary Inscra took over smoothly, although he was bothered by the disappearance of M'Casrai. Phlegmatically he began to give the orders that were locked inside Z'Kafir, when Communications Officer F'Sibr entered the room. Inscra observed that it was only a teletactive counterpart, but he deduced that F'Sibr was operating from the Fleet Communications Room, and he knew how that room could be destroyed. He made a movement, but F'Sibr opened his hand and extended it toward Inscra.

Inscra's eyes—the eyes which had always seemed the only live things in a dummy figure—now died too.

On the outstretched palm was a large gray spider.

Somewhere the word started and went from ship to ship, first a whisper, then a shout growing toward a cheer. "The war's over!" And then a strange comment was added. "We've won! We've won!"

Cold sweat trickled down Airscout Mardel's forehead. An incredulous joy twisted his tight features. The sun was above the horizon. It drenched the whole sea with gold. It glittered from every last vessel. The moment of disintegration had come and gone—a half hour ago.

The giant's stick had poked. The silver ants were scattering. Two collided as he watched. Silvery splotches marked the grave of the *Remote*, the *Infinity*, and the *Ultimate*. There was no order or intelligence left.

Airscout Mardel grinned, snarled "I'm alive!" and sent his flier rocketing crazily toward outer space.

HESHIFER darted from the Fleet Communications Room. Never had he seemed quite so old, or quite so active. He was followed by J'Quilvens and Norm, the latter with his right hand cased in transparent plas-

tic where J'Wilobe's needle ray had mangled it.

"We sealed off the War Room at the start," Heshifer explained. "Now we'll draw the fangs of the whole set-up."

Perhaps in automatic response to the word echoing through the fleet, Norm murmured to J'Quilvens as they hurried along after, "We've won."

J'Quilvens giggled. "Not by a long sight. We've only driven the fleet crazy. And we'll drive the whole world crazy before we're through. From now on, we're attendants in the violent ward. But it's a beginning—a chance!"

The guards before the War Room stepped aside. Heshifer opened the door—and instantly stopped dead. He motioned everyone to stay where they were. "Above all," he whispered, "don't make a move with your weapons."

Over Heshifer's shoulder, framed by the square of the doorway, Norm could see M'Casrai. He was standing behind a table that resembled an altar. In it a black rod was vertically set. M'Casrai looked sad and resolute. The way he stared at them was reminiscent of a sleepwalker. Slowly he began to bear down on the lever.

"Mister President," Heshifer called softly.

M'Casrai paused. "How did you know the name of my real office?" he asked. "I've been careful to keep that a secret from everyone."

"Mr. President," Heshifer said,

"the British ambassador wants an audience. There is an important memorandum from General Scott. And Secretary Seward's here to see you. It's very urgent."

"I know," said M'Casrai. "I'll be right there. But there's something I must do first." Again he bore down on the lever.

"But there's no time, Mister President," Heshifer interjected. "It's come at last. They've fired on Fort Sumter!"

M'Casrai's hand fell away from the lever. "So," he murmured softly. "Well, what must be must be." He came around the table and started toward the door. He smiled, almost sheepishly, at Heshifer. "It's a funny thing, Mister Nicolay," he said. "but I was having the darndest dream—it seemed to last a lifetime. I dreamed they'd made me boss in another world, and there was another war, and there was something I had to do. I wonder"

Then he looked ahead, and his face grew grave and prophetic, as if he were thinking of the brave, bitter times ahead, and the part he must play in them. As he shuffled past, Heshifer heard him mutter as if he were rehearsing that part, "...that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

THE END

BACK ISSUES SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES

Amazing & Fantastic (1964-1970). All issues of S.F. Greats, Thrilling S.F., Science-Fiction Classics, Strange Fantasy, Space Adventures, Science Fantasy, Weird Fantasy, Science Fiction Adventure Classics, Astrounding S.F., Science Fantasy Yearbook, Astounding Stories Yearbook, Science Fiction Adventure Yearbook, Fantastic Adventure Yearbook, The Strangest Stories Ever Told, Science Fiction Classics Annual. (60¢ each) ULTIMATE PUB. CO., Box 7, Oakland Gdns., Flushing, N.Y. 11364





The WORLD of WHISPERING WINGS

By Rog Phillips

Ted wanted to get back to Earth and hunt up a little fast romance. But he forgot things change after three thousand years!

"THREE THOUSAND hours to Earth," Dr. Lansing said, "and we've been away three thousand years. Home..." He grinned, his blue eyes twinkling under his shock of iron-gray hair.

"Home?" Ted Grant said. "Maybe it was to my great-great-etcetera grandpappy. But I wonder how we'll feel there. Anyway, I hope you're right as usual, you old thinking machine. Just think, Andy." He turned to Andy Thorne, the other occupant of the room. "Glamor girls from Hollywood, or its modern counterpart. And we can have our pick of them, too. We're bound to be glamor boys to them. Back from the starways."

"That's the trouble with you young unmarried people," Lansing admonished. "Marriages have dropped eighty-seven per cent this last year over the previous year. And it's all because you young people are dreaming of romances when we land."

"Can you blame us?" Ted persist-

ed. "Bet you wish you were young yourself. Me—I'm going to find a cute Earth girl and see the life there. You'll probably be closeted with Earth scientists, talking over percentages. Or maybe they've advanced so much in science you'll have to go to school all over again."

"That's possible," Lansing said. "Here on the *Astral Traveler* we haven't made too many advances in theoretical physics in three thousand years. On the other hand, civilization wasn't too firmly established when we left.... We should be raising Earth on our radio soon."

Thorne snorted. "Wouldn't it be funny if after coming all the way back to the Solar System we found that life on Earth was gone?"

"It isn't gone," Lansing said. "You've seen the Earth through the telescope. It's substantially the same as the pictures of it. There's been no catastrophe big enough to wipe out all mankind."

The intercom loudspeaker clicked audibly. The three men looked up at it, waiting for it to speak. "Dr. Lansing," it said, "will you please come to Control Center at once?"

The gray-haired scientist picked up the hand mike on his desk and acknowledged the call. "Maybe this is contact," he said.

But when he returned an hour later he was frowning. He shook his head in answer to Grant's and Thorne's questioning look. "I think something has happened to the Earth," he said. "We're skirting the Earth's shadow and taking spectros of sunlight that has passed through the Earth's atmosphere. The absorption spectrum shows some disturbing things. We don't know what to make of them yet."

"Like what, for example?" Grant asked.

"A seventy-five percent increase in carbon dioxide and a ten percent decrease in oxygen content. That indicates either a tremendous increase in vegetable matter or a disastrous decrease in animal population, including man, or both."

"What else?" Grant said.

"There's an appreciable dark line indicating carbon fourteen, the unstable isotope. There shouldn't be. That means there's an appreciable part of a percent of that isotope in the atmosphere as carbon dioxide. And that's impossible, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless there's a gigantic selective reactor in operation on the Earth," Lansing said. "It would have to be designed for the purpose, and it would have been in operation for at least a thousand years. It could have been built with the knowledge Earth had when we left in 1982, but it would take an insane group to actually build it."

"WHAT DO you mean?" Thorne asked. "What could it do?"

You mean it would make so much radioactive carbon that life would be destroyed by the hard radiation?"

"No. Not enough for that. No danger of that. What I mean is that each C-14 atom would be a small bomb liable to explode at any time. In the heart of a living molecule, especially the sperm or egg, it could do anything from destroying the fertilized egg to altering it so that the resultant organism would be malformed. Mutated."

"There's enough for that?" Thorne asked.

Lansing nodded grimly. "The most accurate estimate we can make is that one seven-thousandth of the Earth's carbon is C-14!"

"Then there won't be any human life on Earth?" Grant said, disappointed. "But there must still be people on Earth Station. It's out of range in its orbit outside the atmosphere."

Lansing was shaking his head. "We're close enough to see it in detail now. It's riddled. It was close enough to the Earth so that space debris had a penetrating velocity due to the Earth's gravitational attraction. As long as its electronic repulsor setup operated, it was safe, but somewhere along the line something happened. I'm afraid we've come back to something we should stay away from. We should turn right around and go back to Alpha Centauri." He grinned at their expressions. "But, being human, we won't. The Council has decided we'll land and investigate."

"That's more like it!" Grant exclaimed.

"Don't be in a hurry," Lansing smiled tolerantly. "We'll repair Earth Station first and place some of our overcrowded population on it. We'll also probably build a smaller ship for the actual landing. It may be a year before we can stand on the land of

our home planet. And neither of you may be in that landing party."

"If I'm not," Grant said, "so help me I'll—I'll parachute down *AWOL*."

"That's what I mean," Lansing said, frowning. "You're prone to disobedience. You have a record for it. Still, if I have a say in it, I'll see that both of you are in on the landing."

THE LEAVES whispered softly, almost inaudibly, as the dawn breeze came to life. Whispered, and then became silent. In the silence sounded the distant plaintive call.

"Bah-loo..."

The leaves whispered again, an undertone of officious self-importance in the sound. Balu, hearing it, permitted the beginnings of a smile to quirk her lips.

The breeze, as though encouraged by this sign, shifted slightly, washing against dew-studded fruits. Its new approach was rewarded by a quivering of sensitive nostrils and a further widening of the smile.

The leaves rustled expectantly. Balu rose lazily to one elbow, stretched one wing sleepily until it was fully extended, reached an arm along its forward edge until short-fingered talons touched it, their points a scant inch from the elbow where the wing began to sweep backward.

In almost a continuation of the movement she sat up, instincts maintaining her balance on the six-inch-thick branch. Not until then did she open her eyes, and then abruptly, their smoky violet orbs only partly revealed by the elongated tear-drop frames of jet lashes which began at the edge of either temple, curving around to terminate at tear ducts inherited from oriental ancestors.

"Bah-loo..."

She seemed not to have heard the far-off cry of pleading and protest as she sat on the branch, her long grace-

ful legs swinging, her violet eyes taking in the myriad silver flashes from the underside of the leaves as they were stirred by idle air currents.

A wide yawn revealed even white teeth, a firm red tongue. And then with lazy grace she reached upward with her wings and brought them down swiftly, lifting herself up. Taloned toes, long and powerful like those of a gorilla, seized the rough bark of the limb.

From her impudently pug nose to her overly wide but feminine shoulders, from her softly rounded breasts to her narrow waist and smoothly curving hips, she might have been a girl alone in the privacy of her room. A girl with rich brown hair cropped in a boyish bob, with overly mascaraed eyes. A girl whose firmly molded features were as caucasian as her eyes were not, whose expression mirrored innocence and unselfconscious contentment.

For the barest instant she poised. Then she dived headlong from the branch in free fall, wings trailing, legs doubling up until knees rested together against her breasts.

The wings came to life now, reaching forward to seize the invisible air and toss it backward and downward in skilled thrusts, while the slim arms curved forward and the strangely animal hands seemed ready to protect the face against any unexpected obstacle.

Her head was tilted backward, slitted eyes into the wind, smoldering violet fires lurking in their depths. On her face was still mirrored the expression of contentment and innocent unconcern. Nor did it alter in the slightest as, a third time, the protesting and bloated roar, "Bah-loo!" erupted through the forest.

Before the echoes of that angry wail died she was gone, leaving only the whisper of the leaves.

"God!" Andrew Thorne said with soft reverence into the microphone of his spacesuit.

TED GRANT heard the one-syllable prayer and looked down between his knees through the two miles of space toward the approximate spot where Thorne had dropped. "Find anything yet?" he prompted hopefully.

"No," Thorne's voice came. "I was merely extolling over the beauties of the landscape down here."

"Yeah? I think I'll drop this eggbeater down to where I can do some extolling myself."

"No!" Thorne's voice was sharp. "It might frighten her!"

"Her?"

"Damn," Thorne muttered. "All right, I just saw one of them. But she flew away. I'll have to find her again."

"Flew?" Grant's tone was skeptical. "Angels yet? Good lookers I trust?" When there was no answer from Andrew Thorne, he switched to long distance broadcast. "Grant calling ship," he intoned.

"Go ahead, Grant," the answer came immediately.

"Thorne located one of them. It flew away. From his reactions it was female, young, and beautiful."

"Did you say flew?"

"That's what I said. Flew."

There was a moment of silence. A new voice came on. "What type of machine did it fly away in? This is most amazing. It never occurred to us they still had a machine civilization."

"I gathered that it didn't have a flying machine," Grant said dryly. "Wings. Just wings."

"Even more remarkable," the voice said. "Relay to Thorne that he must get a pair of them at any cost. Spengler was right. These people, left to

themselves, have developed a technology peculiar to themselves. From those wings we may be able to deduce their entire science, from mathematics to plastics. We must get a pair of them at any cost!"

"From Thorne's reaction," Grant said patiently, "I should imagine that if you want a pair of the wings, you'll have to take their owner too. You see," he took a deep breath, "she grew them. At least I think that's what Thorne implied."

"Grew them?" The question exploded through the loudspeaker and was followed by a silence pregnant with surprise. "Impossible! The human features couldn't alter enough to enable them to gather food without the aid of hands. In any mutation that changed the arms to wings, the person would have to be fed continually by hand, or starve to death."

"I wouldn't know," Grant said. "Want me to connect you with Thorne?"

"Yes."

Grant adjusted the necessary switches for a three-way contact and listened...

"Let me get this straight," Dr. Lansing's voice said with the patience a professor exhibits toward a particularly stupid student. "You say the wings are attached to the back? Then they are obviously mechanical."

"No," Thorne said with the dogged stubbornness of a backward student. "When she woke up she stretched them. They aren't mechanical."

"I'm sure you must be mistaken. But keep looking for her. I'm coming over. And Grant, you stay where you are so I can find the place. Is he hovering directly above where you are, Thorne?"

"Approximately. Maybe a quarter of a mile to the south. But I told you she flew away, and I haven't been able to find her."

"She won't have gone far, I'm sure. Wings such as those would have to be refueled often for prolonged flight. No—I know you're convinced they grew. But I assure you that's impossible, even with the C-14 action. You'll see. Keep looking for her. I'm going to leave the ship now."

Grant heard Thorne's deep sigh, and grinned his amusement.

"BAH-LOO..."

Andrew Thorne frowned in speculation over the strange protesting call. It might have been that of some wild creature, except for the sharply accurate enunciation of vowels and consonants.

It was more than possible he decided, that it came from a human throat. Since there was no way of knowing where the girl had flown, he made his way in the direction from which the call had come.

Shortly the terrain changed from the solid mixture of dirt and decayed though dry vegetable matter to a clinking muck that was treacherously slippery as well as clinging. The sparse shrubs and grasses were replaced by a plant that seemed to consist only of fine green threads that lay on the surface of the mud and snarled around his boots when they skidded.

Finally he became unsure of his directions and paused to rest and wait for the call to be repeated. He had a good five-minute wait before it came, and then it seemed to come from a different direction and be farther away than before.

Disappointed, he turned to make his way back to secure ground again.

Without warning he was struck from behind. He fell sprawling and instinctively rolled to his back, fumbling at the catch that would release his hip gun while his eyes searched for the source of danger.

His fingers suddenly froze into mo-

tionlessness. On a limb of a nearby tree the girl was poised ready for flight, her back to him, her head turned so she could watch him, a half-curious, half-afraid smile on her lips.

"Hel-lo!" Thorne breathed, rising in slow movement to a sitting position.

"Hello!" She might have known the meaning of the word or merely repeated the sound. Her voice was clear, well modulated, and entirely feminine. Thorne found himself wanting to hear it again.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said.

"So you *are* a visitor," she mused.

"I wasn't sure. I've never seen a visitor." She lifted herself with a movement of her wings, turning to face him, and in a smooth movement seizing the limb with taloned toes and squatting, hugging her knees and resting her chin on them while her smoky violet-slitted eyes regarded him with frank curiosity.

"So you can still speak!" Thorne stood up slowly.

"Of course," she said. "Our sworn duty is to preserve the language." She paused, then added, "And help one another."

"Do you have a name?"

"Balu." She smiled.

"Balu?" Thorne said. "So that was someone calling you!"

"My brother. Do you have a name?"

"My name's Andrew Thorne. You can call me Andy."

"Andy. I like that. Your shape is strange. Is that why you are here?"

"I'm wearing a space-suit," Thorne explained. "I have to keep it on because of the C-14 in the atmosphere."

"The C-14?" Balu said. Only she pronounced it *Cif-Fortean*, with a quiet reverence.

THORNE was left with his mouth open as the implications of her tone penetrated. He changed the sub-

ject. "Why did you push me over just now?" he asked.

"To have opportunity to see how you behave," Balu said. "I think I like you. I'll come down and let you pet me if you wish to." Without waiting for his reply, she slid off the branch and with two deft swoops of her wings stood erect less than four feet from him, as unconscious of the effect she produced as a little child.

Thorne's spacesuit was suddenly intolerably hot and stifling. He took a step forward, and stopped as his eyes were drawn in hypnotic fascination to hers. She matched his stare, as fascinated by his. They remained that way seconds or minutes. She took a timid step toward him, reached out and touched the chest of his spacesuit with her almost entirely animal paw of a hand.

Awareness of self flooded over her suddenly, changing the delicate pink of her skin to a flushed red.

Once again Thorne was shoved sprawling to the ground, this time on his back. As he fell she turned away, darted a smile at him over her shoulder, and leaped into the air.

He watched numbly as her huge wings scooped upward to carry her out of sight before he had time to call to her. A melodious embarrassed laughter drifted back to him through the trees.

"Balu!" he called. "Come back. Please!" He bit back any further call and got to his feet. "That little devil!" he muttered.

"Sounds more like an angel to me," Ted's voice sounded.

Thorne choked back an angry reply and searched with slowly dwindling hope for some sight of Balu through the trees. Instead there came a now angrily indignant call.

"Bah-loo..."

It was repeated with an almost sobbing undertone. It was louder and

closer than it had been, but seemed to come from no definite direction.

Andrew Thorne felt, abruptly, a great emptiness, a terrific loneliness, an aching yearning, for what he couldn't define. But all that met his searching eyes was the mocking flashes of the silver undersides of the leaves of the trees and the thick twisted branches, and the only sound was the slightly brittle rustle of the leaves as they were moved by the morning breeze.

TED GRANT, using powerful binoculars, had located the bright reflective flash of Thorne's headgear. When Balu fled he was able to follow her flight until she came to a stop a good half mile from Thorne. She was in a small clearing. He watched for a moment and decided she must be picking berries and eating them.

He grinned to himself, shut off his contact with Thorne, and raised Dr. Lansing. "I think it advisable for me to put my gyro on autopilot and go down, sir," he said. "The girl got away from Thorne. I can see where she is. I could reach her in five minutes."

"Keep her in sight and wait until I get there," Lansing's crisp voice ordered.

"I don't think that wise," Ted said. "She's moving about slowly and I'll probably lose her. Better for me to go down."

"All right then," Lansing consented.

"Thank you, sir!" He switched Thorne on again. "Lansing's ordered me down. I was able to follow her flight. She's a couple of miles away from you toward the northwest. You can contact me suit to suit now."

Not waiting for an answer, he shoved in the autopilot, opened the hatch, and dove out.

Now his attention was concentrated on the clearing where he had seen Balu. With the skill of experience he guided his fall in that direction. He planned to land in plain sight of the girl. She had already seen one space-suited figure and therefore would be less afraid. Since Thorne's suit had red trim and his had blue she would know it wasn't the same person.

He loosened the safety flap over his hip gun holster while eager anticipation shone in his eyes. He had no intention of letting Balu get away from him.

At five hundred feet he was directly over her. At fifty feet he released hydrogen into the deep cups of the chute to give them buoyancy. He touched the ground at a speed of three feet a second, so silently that Balu wasn't even aware of his arrival.

Her back was to him. He pulled the snap that released his chute and it rose slowly toward the treetops. He didn't watch it rise. His eyes were taking in the details of the unbelievable figure of Balu, her long slim legs, her narrow waist, the way the long and powerful wings hinged where her shoulder-blades should be, but so naturally and so beautifully that it was impossible to regard them as abnormal.

AS HE studied her he debated what to do. Should he wait until she turned and saw him? She might take to flight without ever doing that, and he couldn't follow her. Nor would he dare shoot her down. The fall might injure or kill her.

He studied her short tousled hair with its careless rich brown waves, her small ears that seemed almost ornaments to hold errant curls in. He came to a sudden decision. "Balu," he said softly.

Her head went up like a wild animal's and became motionless. She

was poised for flight. When he made no further sound she half turned her head. He sucked in his breath at the weird mixture of races blended into her profile. Seeing him, she turned further toward him.

"Why, you're beautiful!" he breathed in surprise.

"You aren't Andy."

"No. I'm Ted. Don't be afraid of me. I won't hurt you. You—you're so beautiful.... Your eyes... I've never seen eyes like yours."

"Some of your words I don't know," Balu said. "Beautiful? Wonderful? Do you mean you think I'm pretty?"

"Yes. Pretty."

"Thank you. You may pet me if you want to." She advanced toward him, her expression coaxing, bright lights in the smoky violet depths of her widely slitted eyes.

"If I want to!" Ted said.

He reached toward her. Abruptly her wings moved, lifting her up and backward. A teasing laugh escaped her lips.

Ted, mistaking her maneuver as an attempt at escape, leaped toward her. His arms encircled her. Surprise held her unresisting as she stared into his eyes.

"I'm going to let you go in a second," he said. "Before I do though I want to make sure you understand that I won't hurt you. Do you understand that?" She nodded. "And you won't fly away?" She hesitated briefly, then shook her head. "All right, you've promised," he said gruffly, releasing her.

She hacked away a step, her expression half subdued. Ted found he was panting and his heart was pounding against his ribs.

He reached out and touched her face with his glove-encased hand. Balu smiled shyly but didn't back away.

"I'm going to take off this space-suit," he said.

"Can you?" Balu said in surprise. "Andy told me *Cif-Fortcan* wouldn't let him."

"God! I forgot about it!" Ted said. He groaned. Then he grinned. Reaching out and wrapping his fingers around her wrist, he said, "Come on, Balu. Let's go find Andy. Before I forget I'm a gentleman and make a pass at you." He grinned and reached for her wrist.

Playfully, she eluded his grasp and pushed at him, her wings starting to lift her into the air. Then she paused and returned to him. He laughed and imprisoned her in his arms, pressing her tightly against his spacesuit and wishing it weren't there. On impulse, he reached up, turned the transparent helmet half way round and took it off. Holding it in one hand, he pulled her toward him with the other, and kissed her full on the lips. "Well," he teased, "guess not everything on Earth has changed. With a little practice, baby, I could almost go for you, claws and all."

She stood quietly watching, with a dreamy smile, as he put the helmet on again. Her nostrils wrinkled when he opened the manual controls on the air tanks to blow out the C-14 from the suit. When he was satisfied, he turned them back to automatic again and took her hand in his.

Her wings beat and threatened to lift them both into the air. Laughing, he said, "Here, none of that. Stop it."

"Let go of Balu!" It was Thorne's voice, frigid with rage.

Ted turned his head and saw Thorne already leaping toward him. He released Balu and jumped aside, shouting, "Take it easy, Thorne. Take it easy."

Thorne came to a half in his head-long charge. "You—you dirty swine!" he gritted. "You fool! You crazy fool! What do you think you're doing? This is no ordinary girl."

"Damn you!" Ted said, leaping forward. He squared off at Thorne, fists doubled. "Don't you try to tell me how to act!"

Neither noticed Balu rise on silent wings and perch on a nearby tree limb. They were glaring at each other, oblivious of everything else.

"Stop shouting!" Dr. Lansing's voice interrupted. "Look up. I'm only a hundred yards above you."

With a wary glance at each other, they looked upward and saw the space-suited figure of the scientist descending with his tandem chute taut above him.

AN EXPRESSION of disappointment had flashed over Balu's face at the cessation of what had promised to be an exciting fight, to be replaced by interest in the figure now landing. That interest was reflected on Dr. Lansing's face also. He released the catch that sent his parachute drifting away without even seeming to be aware of doing so. His eyes were taking in the details of structure, the wings, the strange eyes of Balu.

Thorne and Ted stood in scowling silence while this inspection went on.

"You aren't afraid of us?" Lansing asked. Balu smiled and shook her head quite vigorously. The scientist added, "What a beautiful mixture of the real and the impossible! Tell me, are there more like you here?"

"I have a brother," Balu said.

"Where is he?"

"Out there." Balu pointed vaguely. "He isn't much like me."

"Are there others?" Lansing asked. "People with wings like yours?"

Balu shrugged indifferently. "Maybe." But there seemed to be something akin to fear lurking in her eyes. Lansing saw it and changed his mind about something he was about to say.

Instead, he turned to Thorne and

Ted with a grin. "If you two were fighting about her," he said, "get over it right now. . . ." His voice drifted off. Balu had glanced upward and let out an involuntary gasp, then darted into the concealment of the branches. He looked up.

At first all he could see was the two helicopters hovering at five thousand feet under autopilot, ready to come down by radio control when they were needed for takeoff.

Then he saw a flash of white. His eyes adjusted to it. It was a flying human, legs drawn up against its chest. He saw another and another, until he could make out at least five. They were at three thousand and climbing.

It was Thorne who divined the intention of the flying men. "The ships!" he said. "They're going up to the ships!"

"They will wreck them," Balu said calmly.

"She may be right," Lansing said. "If they board the ships and switch them off auto they'll crash. We'd better bring them down."

He touched a gloved finger to a stud in the chest of his suit and started uttering sharp explosive repetitions of the word *dot*. Ted did the same.

The two helicopters responded by starting to drop rapidly. The winged men moved to intercept the ships.

There began a strange duel in the sky as the two men on the ground maneuvered the ships this way and that, and the flying men darted this way and that to intercept them.

Suddenly one of the flying men was struck by a lift blade which broke one of his wings and half severed it. The ships and men were less than a thousand feet overhead.

A moment later a faint scream drifted down. Two of the others had dived after him and caught him in his

fall. They continued dropping until they were out of sight. Seconds later, having deposited their wounded companion in safety, they rose in zooming flight to join the other two in their attempts to board the two ships.

"If they succeed we'll be stranded for days," Lansing groaned. "Our suit radios won't reach the spaceship."

And even as he said it, two of the flying men darted in from underneath and found secure holds on the undercarriage of each ship. Both Ted and Dr. Lansing maneuvered their ships, trying to throw the winged men off, but they were dealing with men who were accustomed to violent flight. In a moment it was all over. The flying men had gained access to the interiors of the ships and thrown out the autopilot control.

As the ships ceased to respond to remote control, the three men on the ground stood still, watching as the two flying men darted away to join their two companions and watch the ships veer out of control and plunge downward.

"THIS IS awful!" Dr. Lansing said ineffectively. "Our air cycle might exhaust itself before we're found."

"Let's find the ships," Thorne said. "Maybe we can fix one of them. Or maybe we can work one of the radios and contact the space-ship."

The flying men were no longer visible in the sky. Either they hadn't seen the three space-suited figures on the ground, or they didn't care to investigate them.

Balu cautiously came out of concealment. "I'll help you find your ships," she said.

Lansing looked at her, frowning. "I wish you had some clothes to wear," he mumbled.

"Clothes?" She laughed delightedly.

"I know about clothes. I will get some."

She leaped into the air and darted away.

Lansing watched her go. When she was out of sight he turned abruptly to Thorne and Ted. "I want you two to listen to me," he said sternly. "I'm in command. Nobody issues orders here but me. What I say goes. And I want to warn you—I'll tolerate no messing around with this Balu, either. Maybe her ancestors were human, but she's not. If one of you succeeded in mating with her, your offspring would be monstrosities. More than likely they'd be born with their brains outside their skulls like radiation-blasted white mice have been. I won't stand for either of you playing around with her. She's not a toy to be experimented with. I want her to be left alone. Do you understand? If not, I'm going to see that you get full demotion and penalties when we get back to base ship. We're here for routine inspection. And Ted, you particularly—no Don Juan stuff like you're noted for among our own peoples."

"Are you sure you aren't exceeding your authority?" Ted asked softly. "After all, I'm the senior officer on this jaunt. My orders take precedence over those of a civilian scientist. I shall do exactly as I please."

"We are three," Lansing snapped. "Theodore Grant, you are under operational arrest. In the presence of Andrew Thorne, I invoke Articles of Space, Section 14A, Code BF, Item 7.18. Until we return to the ship you are not to speak except to answer specific orders. The slightest infraction of your arrest will be answered by total paralysis. Is that clear? I will take no chances with you."

"Yellow," Ted sneered as he started his hand toward his gun.

Lansing brought out his hip gun.

"That will do," he said. "Mr. Thorne, disarm the prisoner."

The sneer on Ted's face remained as he elevated his arms and permitted Thorne to take his hip gun.

Thorne turned to hand it to Lansing. "Out of the way!" Lansing shouted, then groaned. Thorne turned quickly and saw Ted dropping his helmet to the ground.

"Might as well take my suit too," Ted said. "I'm staying here." He inhaled deeply. "C-14 contamination won't be so bad when I get used to it."

"Do you like me now?" Balu's gay voice broke into the consciousness of the three men like a shot. They turned and gaped at her.

She had taken three leaves from a tree and fastened them in place with long strands of grass.

LANSING sucked in a breath and turned back to Ted. "Put your helmet back on and evacuate your suit or you get paralysis right now."

The sneer came readily to Ted's lips. "Go ahead. You won't dare keep me under permanent paralysis more than a day or two."

Lansing's lips compressed with determination. He made sure of his aim and pressed the contact stud of his hip gun. Surprise started to mold Ted's features and was arrested half way.

Lansing holstered his hip gun. He caught Ted's limp form before it hit the ground. Easing it down, he got the helmet and put it in place. Then he took the cover off the emergency suit controls and operated them until he was sure all the contaminated air was ejected.

Looking up at Thorne he said, "I don't think he could have gotten enough to do any damage."

"What did you do to him?" Balu asked.

"He was insubordinate," Lansing explained. "He shouldn't have taken his helmet off."

"Why not?" she asked. "Why don't you take yours off? Why don't you, Andy? Ted did, and kissed me. I wish you would." She smiled archly, the flirtatiousness of Cleopatra appearing again through the lost centuries, in this creature with the beautiful face, wings and claw hands.

"You mean he took it off before this time?" Lansing said.

When she nodded, he stood up. "The fool," he said. "The poor benighted fool. This planet does things." He looked pityingly at Thorne. "Don't let it affect you too, son. Life patterns gone crazy, every individual born here the first and last member of a unique species in the constant reshuffle of infected gene structures...."

Thorne averted his eyes. He looked at Balu, tried to turn away, then let himself look directly into her violet, alien and yet somehow not alien eyes staring invitingly from behind their broad almond curtains of lids.

He jerked his eyes away. "We'd better get to the ships, sir," he said gruffly. "I'll carry Mr. Grant."

THE TREE trunks rose twistingly to become many crooked limbs that climbed still higher until they were lost in the silver blanket formed by the undersides of their leaves. Occasionally there was a break that revealed the blue sky and billowy bleached clouds. Sunlight streamed down in broad staircases.

There was no sound other than the heavy breathing of Thorne from the exertion of carrying Ted's lax form, the scuffling of his and Lansing's feet through the tough grass, and the sounds Balu's broad wings made when

she darted overhead, keeping pace with them.

On Thorne's face was an expression of bitterness that reflected his inner and unsuccessful attempt to draw his thoughts away from Balu.

On Dr. Lansing's face a half frown rested, forgotten. His trained eyes automatically took in the details of structure of the plants, the occasional insects, tabulating what they saw.

In his mind's eye he was seeing the theoretical picture of a giant molecule with its chains and rings and branches of connected carbon atoms that depicted a living chromosome. He was seeing the normal chemical actions that took place in that theoretical chromosome and its companions. Normal chemical action that eventually produced a living organism. Tree or animal or human.

And then in his mind's eye he was seeing a different kind of action. In the heart of this giant theoretical molecule, where no external atom or ion could reach, a carbon fourteen atom suddenly became something that wasn't carbon. Subtle shiftings of ionic potentials began, and when they were completed the chromosome was something else.

By analogy he saw the structure of chromosomes in the seed bearing the same relation to the adult organism that a set of basic postulates does to a system of mathematics, or a set of traffic laws does to over-all behavior of traffic. One insignificant change spreading its effects throughout the resultant system, altering it perhaps beyond recognition.

AND INSTEAD of that basic change being brought about in a sensible and intelligent manner, it was wrought by chance. Blind chance that placed an unstable carbon atom any place in the molecule. Blind chance

that dictated when that atom would change, and what would result when it did.

That process had been the major mechanism of evolution from the first beginnings of life. Its workings had given the first and most primitive of virus forms a protective wall that had made it into a single-celled life form. That process had given the cell wall properties of cohesion that made possible the multi-celled organism. That process, working through the one unstable carbon atom in a thousand billion, had enabled blind chance to explore every avenue of possibility in organic chemical structure over an interval of ten thousand centuries until it discovered Man!

But here Lansing noted the differences that made each tree, each leaf, each blade of grass, unique. Here was no one C-14 in a thousand billion atoms of carbon. Instead, by actual test, there was one in every seven thousand. An average of three in the structure of every molecule that possessed the attribute of Life!

Lansing looked around. Here, in the grasses underfoot, the trees, the insects, and in the female form that flitted overhead from tree to tree, pausing to look down at him and Thorne and Grant, was the blind process of evolution carrying on its explorations at a mad pace a billion times faster than Nature intended; so swiftly that it had no time for stabilizing and perpetuating its discoveries!

In swift bold strokes it lifted the human form to that of angels, and plunged it down to the primeval slime. There was no way of knowing what Balu's parents were like, or what her offspring would be like, except that they would almost certainly not be like her.

Lansing's brooding frown etched its way deeper into his features. Here

was the force of Life, taking inanimate atoms and shaping them together into the animate dynamism of living form. And here too was the force, infiltrating carbon fourteen, making of that Life force a plaything.

He sensed it around him, touching against the wall of his spacesuit with bungry fingers from the atmosphere, omnipresent and infinitely patient, ready to permeate and contaminate every cell of his body—if he would but take off his helmet and breathe: for, though the bloodstream primarily absorbs oxygen and gives off carbon dioxide, it also absorbs carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, so that with each breath millions of carbon ions enter the blood. *And only one C-14 atom in the right place is needed to produce a mutation!*

Something jerked Lansing out of his reverie. He looked around, trying to find what it had been—and saw the supposedly paralyzed Grant's hand cautiously extracting Thorne's gun from its bolster.

"LOOK OUT, Thorne!" he shouted, leaping forward.

He saw the gun come up and center on him. He tried to duck aside. Then he felt the tingling sensation of every member of his body going to sleep. As he sprawled forward he caught a fleeting glimpse of the gun being turned down toward Thorne's legs. He found himself staring straight up through the trees at the sky. Aside from the tingling feeling of arms and legs asleep, and even stomach and chest and shoulders, he wasn't uncomfortable.

But how long had he been that way? Searching his mind he was distinctly aware of a gap in time. How long it had been was impossible to tell.

"Damn you, Ted," he heard Thorne

say. "My legs are paralyzed. Put down that gun. You're insane."

"Insane?" Grant mocked. "For the first time in my life I'm not insane." He laughed.

Thorne's voice sounded in a sharp, "Don't!"

A moment later Lansing saw Grant standing above him. He was no longer wearing his spacesuit.

"I just wanted you to see me," Grant said. "Now you'll know there's no use looking for me. By the time you found me I would be too contaminated to be allowed on the ship. Goodbye."

Lansing tried to talk, to tell him to put his suit back on, to explain to him he was sick. That the C-14 had in some way gone to his brain and he was doing things he didn't really want to do. But he was gone, and there were only the still trees and the jagged spots of blue sky.

And there was no sound except for the infrequent petulant wail from far away: "Bah-loo..."

Balu had said it was her brother. Why did he keep calling her? Why did she so calmly ignore his call? Why didn't he come looking for her, or *could* he look for her? From the deepness of his voice he was quite obviously adult. Was he one of those winged men who had scuttled the two helicopters? What had become of the wounded flying man?

These and dozens of other questions formed in Lansing's thoughts without any hope of immediate answer.

He returned again and again to the winged men. It was significant that the only humans he had seen so far all had wings. Was it possible that nature had found an answer to C-14 in some genetic pattern that remained stable, and that all human life here was now of the winged variety? That seemed impossible, but wings growing

from shoulder-blades were impossible, too, and Balu had them....

The tingling feeling began to grow less. According to the books that meant paralysis would soon go away. The sensory system would recover before the motor network. There would be a period of perhaps five minutes during which feeling would be normal but muscular action still difficult. Lansing wished he could at least turn his head and see how Thorne was.

Something vibrated through his spacesuit. It was repeated. It came at regular-spaced intervals and seemed to be a shaking of the ground he lay on. It could be some gigantic creature walking. A distant crashing noise lent support to that theory. The sound died away. The shaking of the ground stopped.

Suddenly Lansing felt his eyes blink. It was painful until tears washed accumulated dust particles away. Involuntarily he moved his head, then froze in surprise and dismay.

Several winged men squatted around in attitudes of patient waiting.

Lansing stared at them. Then his eyes went to Thorne. Strands of the tough grass were wrapped around his wrists and ankles. He was still under paralysis, but when he recovered he would be unable to move.

Experimental tugs at his own legs and arms revealed that he was also tied.

"One of them moves," a winged man said.

LANSING thought swiftly. How much did they know? How dangerous were they? The thongs, the patient waiting until one of them showed signs of movement, pointed to their being friendly but cautious.

Acting on this assumption he looked directly at the speaker and smiled.

"Yes, I'm awake now," he said casually.

"And so am I," he heard Thorne say, matching his tone.

"Fine," the winged man said. "We'll untie your legs so you can walk. Then we must take you to Oldred to see what is to be done."

"Who is Oldred?" Lansing asked as fingers started unraveling the grass strands around his ankles.

"You don't know?" the winged man asked. The others were watching with great interest. "He's our leader. He will want to know about men who shed their skin." He pointed.

Lansing and Thorne sat up and saw what he meant. Ted Grant's helmet and suit lay on the ground where they had been abandoned. Their eyes widened. They looked at each other in secret warning.

"Stand up," the winged man said. "Soon it will get dark."

Lansing noted with surprise as he stood up that the winged men were small. They were only five feet tall, which made them a good five inches smaller than Balu. They all had the close-cropped hair. Their features varied in detail, one face hinting at one race and another at another, but none of them had eyes as strange as Balu's. In fact, he decided, except for the muscular and efficient-looking wings, they were quite ordinary in appearance. One of them even had normal hands and feet.

"Come on," their spokesman ordered. He led the way.

Lansing recalled the aerial view of the country as he had seen it from the helicopter. Fifty miles in the direction they were now travelling was a range of hills. Before that, perhaps less than ten miles away, was a small lake.

"Bah-loo..."

The wailing bawl broke in on Lan-

sing's thoughts. He looked at the winged men. They seemed not to have heard it.

"What was that?" he asked.

"That," one of the winged men said, "was Oldred."

"Then your leader is Balu's brother?" Thorne said in relief.

The winged men all stopped and looked at him. "What do you know of Balu?" one of them asked in a menacing growl.

"We...chanced to meet her," Lansing said quickly. "She told us her name. Then she flew away."

The winged men said no more, but now the pace they set was much faster. The slope of the ground changed to gradual ups and downs and finally became all downhill. They crossed a clearing that gave a view of the lake. Two of the winged men took to the air and went on ahead.

Speaking in German Thorne said, "Should we try to escape?"

Lansing shook his head and answered in the same language. "No. We probably couldn't for long, and I want to see this leader they have. Also, we'll be missed before too long, and so long as they think our space-suits are skin, they won't try to take them off us. When the search party comes within range of our suit radios we can tell them how to find us."

"What were you saying?" a winged man asked suspiciously.

"We were discussing your leader," Lansing said. "He must be a very great man."

"Then you've seen him before!"

"No," Lansing said. "I was merely judging by the appearance of you and your companions."

"Oh?" the winged man said vaguely. "Well, you're right. He is a great man. He grows greater all the time. Within the memory of man he has al-

ways been great. Some day the lake will be too small for him."

He waited until he saw the effect his statement had produced, then turned his eyes away.

"He must be kidding," Thorne said in German.

"I don't know," Lansing said thoughtfully. "It may be possible. Continued growth isn't half as fantastic a possibility as wings. The most fantastic thing about it is..."

"What?" Thorne said.

"If Balu is his sister—"

"That would make her far older than she looks!" Thorne said.

"That's true," Lansing said. "But what I was thinking was, that would make it possible that she is the mother of all these winged men."

THEY STOOD close together on the sandy beach, their eyes searching the undisturbed surface of the lake. A quarter of a mile out was something small and white. It hadn't moved since they arrived.

The winged men seemed to be waiting.

Rapid movement overhead attracted their attention. It was several of the winged people. Two of them were carrying a third between them. One of his wings was half severed. It was the one who had tangled with the helicopter blade.

The group darted out over the lake toward the thing that stuck out of the water. As they neared it, it emerged further from the lake.

Lansing and Thorne stared in stark unbelief. It was the profile of a face. Bloated almost beyond recognition it was still a human face. And from the indeterminate chin to the sloping top of the forehead it was at least a hundred feet.

The group of flyers slowed to

hovering flight above it. Screams drifted across the intervening water to those on shore. Abruptly the wounded flying man was dropping. Still screaming, he was trying desperately to fly with his one good wing.

The gigantic face elongated another ten feet. The flyer vanished within the maw of the enormous mouth. It closed, cutting off his screams. At the same time, the surface of the water was convulsed and a human chest acres in extent broke the surface.

Another group of winged people appeared over the lake. Four of them were teamed together over the body of a large animal. The mouth opened again to receive this additional morsel.

Dazed at the sight, Lansing looked around him—at the peaceful trees, at the white sandy beach, so normal in the framework of concepts he had built up about the Earth. He looked back at the monstrous form in the lake and squeezed his eyes tightly together, shaking his head. When he opened them again mild waves were washing up on the beach.

A winged man grinned at him. "We all get there eventually. I think you two will be next, though. Oldred will be curious about your taste."

"Now?" Thorne asked Lansing tensely, in German.

"No," Lansing said. "I think our guns can paralyze that thing's throat if we get dropped in. I want a chance to observe it and see if it still has intelligence. It must have taken centuries for it to grow that large. Maybe it knows what happened. I want to talk to it."

"Bab-loo..." The call was a deafening roar. But now there was an understandable reason why it had carried ten miles!

"You want to talk to it?" Thorne exclaimed.

A SWIFT figure darted into sight from over the treetops and landed lightly on the sand after seeming certain to be about to crash. It was a child, a girl. "The hairdred is coming!" she shrieked. "The hairdred. This way." She turned and leaped into the air, her wings taking deep bites for quick altitude.

"Hairdred!" It was a murmur of fear.

Lansing felt the ground under him quiver the way it had when he had first regained feeling after the paralysis. The winged men looked fearfully toward the trees. Two of them seized him between them and leaped into the air. Their wings beat frantically as they rose a few feet. With cries of disappointment they dropped him.

He landed sprawling on the hard-packed sand and had a fleeting glimpse of Thorne doing the same. Then everything was blotted from his mind by the sight that confronted him.

The creature was eight or nine feet tall. Its arms were long and its legs were very short and bowed. From its broad shoulders to its pink toes it was covered with a mat of hair.

But it was its face that drew Lansing's eyes with hypnotic horror. A face that was entirely human, on a large scale, and perfectly proportioned—lean cheeked, a firm cleft chin and beautiful nose. By itself and without regard to size it was definitely a pure British type. Except for the eyes. The pupils and irises were black. What should have been the whites were a mottled dullish brown. Large veins formed networks over their surface. In contrast to the face, which seemed molded in lines of gentleness, intelligence and humor, the gleaming jet centers of the eyes seemed to hold the ultimate spirit of hate and evil.

They added the touch that made the face that of a fallen angel, a Sathanus. In keeping with the giant beast form of the body.

Thorne had seen it too. The initial moment of surprise was over for them and for the hairdred. As it raised one of its legs to step forward, both tremendous arms reaching toward them, they fumbled madly with their bound hands at the flaps over their hip guns.

Thorne secured his gun first. He pointed it at the nearest part of the giant anatomy, a leg. The hairdred toppled sideways, an expression of surprise on its face.

One of its hands touched Lansing's legs. Fingers big as jointed forearms wrapped around, squeezing. Lansing screamed at the pain. His gun was out. He pointed it at the arm and saw the huge fingers slacken.

The hairdred uttered the equivalent of a grunt of surprise. It came out as a deep unhuman bellow.

Both men were now playing their paralysis guns over the monster. Even when it lay completely still they continued, until their frenzied fear abated.

Trembling, they stared at the mountainous bulk.

"Horrible!" Lansing said shakily. "Horrible. Horrible. And yet, it's human. I can still feel sorry for it. Except for C-14 and the inroads it has made in these thousands of years, it would be like us. That face. That beautiful godlike face."

"All I hope is that they find us and get us off this planet," Thorne said. "And when they do, I hope they drop a sunmaker bomb and wipe out the whole ungodly mess."

"Oh, no," Lansing said quickly. "I think—" He stopped and looked up as a flurry of wings descended and the flying men were back.

"What did you do?" they asked, and there was caution and respect in their manner.

"WHAT IS it?" Lansing asked, evading the question. "That girl called it a hairdred. You've called that monstrous thing out in the lake Oldred."

"Oh," one of the winged men said, "all the giants are called dreds. None are like our Oldred."

"I can see that," Lansing said impatiently. "What I mean is, is there a race of giants? Are there more like this one?"

"Race?" The winged man looked puzzled. "What's that? There are more of them, of course. Lu is this one's brother." He pointed at one of the other winged men, who grinned and nodded vigorously.

"Your brother?" Lansing said. "But how can that be? You are so different."

"We are molded by our spirit," Lu said seriously. "The flesh takes the form predetermined by the soul."

"Nonsense!" Lansing said sharply. "Your form is determined by the gene pattern in the egg. And it's unstable carbon, C-14, that has botched up the human strain."

"I don't know many of the words you use," Lu said, "but you are right, according to the teachings. *Cif-For-teen* is the Universal Spirit that molds the flesh to fit the spirit. But you and your companion have very strange spirits indeed. None are like you. Oldred will be interested when we can attract his attention."

"When will that be?" Thorne asked.

"Maybe not for days. Right now he's hungry. We hunters have been scouring the country for days, searching for enough food to satisfy his appetite."

"Why don't you let him die?"

Lansing said. "He's too big. It would be an act of mercy to—"

"But we were created to serve him!" Lu said. "You just don't know what you say. You must be from a far place."

"And him?" Lansing said, pointing to the hairdred.

Lu shrugged. "If he lives, then many lifetimes from now he will crawl into the lake beside Oldred when his legs will no longer support him. Maybe he will kill Oldred. Then our children's children will feed him."

"Oldred once walked on land?" Lansing asked.

Lu nodded. "It's so. Far before the memory of anyone but Balu, our grandmother."

"What is the far place you are from?" one of the other winged men asked impatiently.

"Too far for you ever to have heard of it," Lansing said. "There are many of us, but we came here in flying machines. You know about that, of course. You made our flying machines fall to the ground."

LU WAS shaking his head knowingly. "We do know about it. You must be from the home of the *Cif-For-teen*. Within the memory of Oldred some of our ancestors found it after many days of flight. Only two lived to return. The others were—" He stopped, his eyes widening, and turned to the hairdred. "Made helpless so they couldn't move!"

"What happened to them then?" Lansing said.

"They were taken behind a wall of solid water that surrounded a huge place and covered over the top of it. Though the two waited for many days they never came out."

"So Oldred has said," the original spokesman for the winged men said.

"You are two of the guardians of the *Cif-Forlean* then? You must be." When Lansing hesitated, he dropped to his knees and bowed his head. "I am Paul," he said. "I wish to thank you for giving me the form of a winged man. I have tried to be worthy of it."

The others had dropped to their knees and were saying much the same thing. None of them noticed the change that had come over the hairdred. He had recovered and was lying still, waiting for his chance. Now, suddenly, his gigantic hands shot out. Both Lansing and Thorne found themselves dangling head down with one leg imprisoned in a giant fist.

"And I wish to curse you before I kill you," the deep voice of the giant said, "for giving me the form of a beast so that I am an outcast."

"Stop!" Lansing said, fumbling for his hip gun. "Don't you know there is purpose in everything? We made you as you are because we had a purpose for doing so!"

The hairdred, about to dash them both to the ground, paused. As Lansing had hoped, he was curious, and so long as curiosity remained he would not destroy the ones who could satisfy that curiosity.

"Put us down!" Lansing ordered.

Slowly, reluctantly, the giant gorilla monster with the face of a man obeyed.

Lansing saw that this had increased the respect of the winged men. A plan, an idea, was born in his mind. He gave Thorne a warning look. Then, looking up into the face of the hairdred, he said with great solemnity, "From now on you belong to me and will serve me. And you, Lu and Paul, and your companions, will also serve me."

He paused, searching in his thoughts for something else to say that might

help. It wasn't necessary. The winged men were again on their knees. And the hairdred, his brilliant coals of eyes flashing with a new fire, had also dropped to his knees. "We are yours," he boomed, a world of pride going into the *we*. Tears welled from his weirdly soft eyes. Tears that washed away some of the infinite loneliness of a lifetime of ostracism from the companions of his childhood.

IT WASN'T until later that Lansing and Thorne could talk. The sun had gone down. The moon cast an eerie glow through the trees that made things visible in an unreal way. Thorne had watched the winged men fly to high branches and relax in what seemed suicidal positions, and had recalled his first glimpse of Balu as she slept that morning.

Fred the hairdred was stretched out on his side not far away, callous of danger, his broad shoulders making his relaxed width as much as an average man's height.

Lansing seemed eager to discuss something. Thorne had questions he wanted to ask. Both men talked in German in low voices.

"How did you know the beast would let us down?" Thorne asked.

"Remember when you were under paralysis?" Lansing said. "You were able to hear everything clearly. I knew he had heard us talking and had digested a lot of what we said. Even so, it was just a gamble I was taking while I tried to get my gun out of its holster. And the others, I saw it would be utterly useless to try to teach them the truth about themselves now. Better to use their beliefs to their own advantage and use them to help us get to the root of what's happened here on our home planet."

"But we know what's happened,"

Thorne said. "The unstable carbon has caused it all."

"Yes. But unless some artificial source kept manufacturing it, it would drop to a minimum before long. Remember what they said about a domed city? My guess is that somewhere here on Earth a group still lives that knows science. I would say that they have atomic piles that are set up to make C-14 and disperse it in the atmosphere."

"But why?" Thorne said. "What would be their object?"

"There's no way of learning that until we find them. Some of the microfilm records of books I've read mention something about groups that believed the only way man could be peaceful was to practically wipe him out, and keep him that way. It could be that some sect of that type gained control of an atom plant during a war and carried their plan into successful operation, and their descendants have carried on the plan. If so, we've got to find that dome city and put a stop to it. In a few hundred years, or even less, the C-14 would drop to a safe level. The various breeds of man would slowly straighten out and breed true. History could start over again. Especially with us of the *Astral Traveler* to guide things and later establish colonies of our own kind here, with birth-control restrictions off so that we could multiply."

"What about people like our friend Fred?" Thorne said.

"It would all straighten itself out. I hope." Lansing smiled. "Fred, the poor devil. Things like that hundred-foot-long monster in the lake couldn't last. I wonder if he'll live forever if fed? I've been trying to figure out his age from his size. He must be over a thousand years old. Maybe about fifteen hundred."

"And his sister," Thorne said. "How could she live as long if she doesn't keep growing?"

"Some other glandular balance. We won't bother about those things. Time enough for study after we find and root out the fiendish thing that's causing this tragedy to humanity. Now, let's get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day."

"I wonder how Ted is making out," Thorne said after a long silence.

Lansing sighed. "There used to be micro-organisms that made their way into the body and multiplied rapidly under the ideal environment they found there. One of mankind's greatest battles was against that type of enemy. I venture to say Ted's corpuscles are very busy. It'll be interesting to dissect his body when we find it. Still, maybe he will survive. I've been puzzling about what came over him to behave the way he did."

"I know what came over him," Thorne said dully. "Something that's lain dormant for three thousand years while we traveled through space. Something stronger than—anything."

After a long time Thorne went to sleep, with Balu's eyes vivid in his mind. Eyes that held the secret of life and promised to reveal it to those who had courage.

Lansing remained awake a few moments longer, covertly watching Thorne and understanding far better than Thorne could have guessed. Just as he was dozing off, a thunderous bellow from the lake shattered the night.

"Bah-loo..."

Oldred, too, was lonely.

BOTH THORNE and Lansing slept fitfully. The night seemed full of sounds, and it was the first night outside the confines of a ship for each of them. There was the sound of the

trees swaying in the breeze, the small sounds of night creatures. Once one of the winged men fell off his branch and uttered an involuntary cry of alarm as his instincts made his wings catch hold and keep him off the ground. And Fred the hairdred snored, though it was more like the soft sound of regularly spaced blowoffs from an air tank with a safety valve.

Once, just before dawn, a faint whisper came over the suit radio. "Dr. Lansing," it said. But it was very faint and wasn't repeated.

At dawn Oldred once again took up his petulant calling for Balu. With the first stentorian bellow the winged men awakened. Lansing marveled at the delicate balance they maintained while they stretched their wings.

Fred opened his large round eyes without otherwise moving a muscle. The iridescent black pupils contracted to small dots in the center of soft brown hemispheres as he regarded Lansing thoughtfully.

Lansing returned the stare, waiting. He found it hard to believe that these strange mutations on the human race could be held by superstitious awe. Surely, he thought, a night's sleep will have made clear to them that their variation from the norm is due to the quite understandable action of an element with known properties, and that no supernatural agency was involved.

But one by one the winged men dropped to the ground and bent low in an attitude of reverence, first to him and then to Thorne. When the hairdred finally heaved himself to his feet with a grunt and did reverence as humbly as had the others, Lansing breathed a sigh of relief. It still seemed too improbable to accept, but there it was.

It was Lu who asked the inevitable

question. "Should we bring you food, Dr. Lansing?"

The vision of actually eating ounces of radio-active carbon in food made him shudder. He shook his head, and saw the awe in Lu's eyes increase. He turned and looked at Thorne with a half smile. When no one was looking both men surreptitiously pressed the stud on their belts that popped food tablets into their mouths, and a second stud that raised a tube to their mouths so they could draw in water. The suits were designed to be lived in for periods at a time. It would be another ten days at least before the problem of exhaustion of food, air and water would have to be met.

"No," he said. "As soon as you and your companions have eaten, I want you to find out if Oldred will talk to us. I want to ask him some questions."

IT WAS AN hour later that he and Thorne, watching from the shore, saw Lu pause above the monster and make motions that brought the head further out of the water. Water cascaded from an ear for a full minute in a foot-thick stream. Then Lu dove down on spread wings to land on the ear. Fifteen minutes went by. Then a bellowed "Yes," came from the giant lips. Like a slowed-down tape recorder Oldred said, "Bring them out where I can see them. I'll answer questions."

Ready-made ropes of grass fiber were brought to make harnesses for Lansing and Thorne. They were each carried by four of the winged men to spots four or five hundred feet directly over the mountainous face.

They steeled their stomachs against the awful sight. The toothless mouth was a yawning cavern in a mountain of flesh that bore a strong resemblance to a human face overlaid with

layers of fat. The whitish tongue alone weighed tons.

"Your questions," Oldred said, and the breath of his speech made the carriers waver in their hovering flight.

"How old are you?" Lansing asked.

Winged men farther down relayed the question to Lu who shouted it into Oldred's ear.

Miraculously, a smile quirked across the mountainous face. "Lord, I don't know," came the answer. "A thousand or two thousand years, I guess."

"Do you remember when humanity began to change?"

"In my memory it has always changed, but in my youth while I still walked the land I was told tales of a new spirit that had taken charge of the world many centuries before, molding man's flesh to fit his spirit. I was told that I had a very great spirit, and it must be so."

"When you still walked the land, were there others that appeared like us?"

"I have seen them. But none for many centuries."

"When you still walked on the land, was Balu in existence?"

"She is my sister," Oldred said. "My twin sister. She is like our mother, with her wings, and somewhat like our father with her eyes. When our mother died I was already almost too big to walk on the land, and our mother made her swear she would protect me until I died. That is why she cannot die until I do. And something within me says I will never die so long as *Cif-Fortcan* rules the world."

"Where is *Cif-Fortcan*?" Lansing asked, aping Oldred's pronunciation of the term.

"It is everywhere, within us and within all living things. It is a spirit

in the air itself. But its throne is within the dome of solid water far to the north of here, protected by— But why do you ask? Aren't you of the Guardians?"

Lansing started to say no. He realized abruptly that that would be the worst thing he could do. Oldred believed he would die if the pile that produced C-14 were destroyed.

"Yes," he lied. "But we were lost, and must find our way back. We must be taken to the dome of solid water."

"It shall be done." Oldred spoke with an air of finality, and promptly dropped back into the water, nearly engulfing Lu.

Lansing's and Thorne's ears were still reverberating from the deafening roar of Oldred's voice when they were set down on the shore again.

THE FLYING men left Lansing and Thorne on the beach with Fred the hairdred. Only one of them returned. Lu.

"I've been chosen to accompany you to the north," he said.

"Only you?" Lansing said.

"Only one of us can be spared. There aren't enough of us to keep Oldred in food."

Lansing stared at Lu. The man wasn't telling the truth. And he seemed most unhappy about going.

"Where are the others?" he said.

"We ought to talk this over."

Lu shook his head. "It has been decided," he said with finality.

"I'll be enough to protect you," Fred said. "Lu can be our guide, flying above the trees to see what's ahead."

"All right," Lansing said.

Thorne spoke in German. "I think they believe whoever goes with us won't come back."

"That must be it," Lansing said in

German. Then in English, "We want to see our flying machines that you wrecked. Then we'll start north."

They started the way they had come the day before. Fred led the way, his enormous shoulders swaying with his walk, seeming entirely animal from in back with his matted head of hair blending with his body fur. Lu spent most of his time in the air, dropping down for a chat occasionally.

It was afternoon before they reached the two helicopters. One had burned, leaving only a charred skeleton of metal. The other had crashed a mile away. Although it hadn't caught fire, it was strewn over a wide area. Neither could possibly be repaired. The radios of both would never work again.

"We'll just have to keep going until a searching party happens to pass close enough for our suit-radio to reach them," Lansing said.

For the rest of the day they traveled. The tough grass polished the boots of their space-suits. It also made walking an effort. Fred had a trick of letting his feet bend back so they weren't snagged by the grass, a trick the normal foot couldn't imitate.

Night came. Lu stretched out on a limb. Fred lay on his side, his broad back against a tree trunk. Both were asleep almost instantly.

AND THEN, suddenly, it was morning. Aching muscles slowly warmed up, but the grass seemed a little thicker underfoot and a little tougher. New varieties of trees took the place of the silver-leaved ones.

In the afternoon a river presented a problem. Lu was away for half an hour searching for a place they could cross, and when he found one it took most of the remainder of the day to reach it and cross.

Just before dark Fred stopped suddenly and motioned them to be silent. His black eyes were alight with excitement. Noiselessly he stole ahead until he was out of sight.

A few minutes later a loud frightened bellow exploded in the silence. It was followed by thrashing sounds. Frantic bawling noises sounded. Then for a while there was nothing but silence.

The hairdred returned dragging the body of a huge nonhuman creature behind him. "Food," he said.

For the next few minutes he was busy tearing off the skin. When that was done he tore out huge chunks of meat and offered them to Lansing and Thorne. When they shook their heads, unable to hide the disgust on their faces, he grinned broadly and sat on his haunches while he gulped down large chunks of the steaming raw meat.

Lu had returned unnoticed. He perched on a limb and watched Fred, and when the hairdred had finished eating all he could hold and had stretched out to sleep, he dropped down and ate his fill.

During the night other animals came. Each time Fred awakened and snarled. And each time the animals slunk away, their gleaming eyes glaring hate.

In the morning Lu was gone.

"HIS PROBABLY just scouting around," Lansing said cheerfully.

"No," Fred said, his huge features mirroring the tragedy of a twice-broken heart. "I can see now he intended to leave us from the start. He was to lead us far enough away so that we couldn't find our way back, and then leave us."

"But why?" Lansing said.

The hairedred sbrugged without answering.

"We'd better go back," Thorne said. "We have no idea where to go from here. No use going on."

"Maybe you're right," Lansing said. "A search party from the ship will find us easier near the wreck of our helicopters anyway."

But an hour later they realized how impossible was their plan to return. They were lost. Too late they saw how completely dependent on Lu's guidance they had been. They couldn't even find the river they had crossed.

Fred, in spite of his beast shape, was peculiarly lacking in a sense of direction. Or perhaps he was deliberately playing dumb because he didn't want to go back. Lansing thought of that, but didn't want to antagonize the brute by saying so.

When night came again they might have been miles or merely a hundred yards from their starting point of the morning.

Clouds had been gathering during the afternoon. When the sun went down it began to rain. For a while Thorne threw off his depressed mood as he and Lansing marveled at the peculiar phenomenon.

Fred sat on his haunches and listened as they theorized on how the raindrops were formed. He seemed to be trying to follow their lines of thought. When they held out a hand to watch the drops spatter on it he did the same, his enormous face lined with concentration.

The talking grew sporadic, finally ceasing altogether. Lansing realized suddenly that he, and Thorne and Fred, were each lonely. For himself, he was lonesome for the comforts and the ordered surroundings of the spaceship. The rain thumping against his suit and the plastiglass of his helmet had a mechanical rhythm that re-

mined him too vividly of the rhythms in the ship.

Thorne—it was impossible to guess what he was lonely for. There was something about this Earth that had a strange effect on the emotions. He had felt it several times.

The sound of the rain, for example, as it fell on the leaves of the trees and on his suit. It made a distinct and strange impression on him. He recalled now that moonlight had had a strange effect on him too.

He had read in some book about something related to that. It came to him after a moment. An ancient pseudoscience called Astrology. It had been just a brief article. Its basic tenet had been that the stars and the planets and the moon had emotional effects on the human mind that could be charted. It was analogous to the known effects of endocrine cycles on the emotional makeup. The article had suggested that any basis Astrology might have in fact was probably directly attributable to the endocrine rhythms.

But now that he was actually here on the Earth, Lansing wasn't so sure. "There are subtle forces here that work on the mind," he decided sleepily.

He opened his eyes to a scene of glistening splendor. Things around him seemed brighter and cleaner. There was a new feeling in his body. It came to him with surprise what it was. He had become accustomed to the long hard work of walking all day. For the first time since he had set foot on the Earth he felt thoroughly rested and fresh.

He got to his feet and looked down at Thorne, still asleep a few feet away. Suddenly his eyes contracted. The hip bolster at Thorne's side was empty. Its gun was gone. He reached to make sure his own was still in

place. His hand encountered an empty holster.

There was a deep animal grunt behind him. He whirled. The hairdred, Fred, had awakened and was getting to his feet.

"My gun," Lansing said harshly. "Did you take it while I was asleep?"

"Gun?" Fred said. "What's that? No, I didn't take anything. Is something gone?"

Lansing studied him with narrow eyes. Either the human monster was a superb actor, or something else had stolen in and taken the two guns. Had it been Lu? Or had something else taken them?

He searched through the trees with his eyes. There was no sign of movement.

"WHAT'S THE matter?" Thorne asked sleepily.

Lansing spoke in German. "Something stole our guns while we were asleep. I don't think it was our companion. It may have been the one who was with us. Or it may be something new. But we must be careful that our companion doesn't learn we are helpless without them."

Thorne nodded. "Right," he said. "But I disagree with you about our companion. I think he did it. He's shrewd behind that air of dumb innocence."

The gleaming black eyes were looking at them with a patient puzzling light as though trying to decipher the strange words. They lit up at a sudden thought. "I wonder," Fred said. "Maybe Lu left us yesterday because we were near where he was taking you. Maybe he thought you could go the rest of the way without him."

Lansing shook his head. "I doubt if we've gone fifty miles from the lake. It may be only twenty miles. If

it were near here we could have seen it when we were up in our flying machines."

"I saw those," Fred said.

Lansing turned to Thorne. "There's something in back of all this," he said in German. "I'm beginning to think we've been lied to and deceived all along. In fact, I'm sure of it. Maybe there isn't even any domed city. That might have been an invention to get us started on this journey to get rid of us."

"Why would they do that?" Thorne asked.

"Remember our status before we used our guns on this companion we have here?"

"We were prisoners."

"And suddenly we were revered personages, the most irresistible form of flattery. And suddenly again we were completely deserted and lost."

"In retrospect it does sound that way," Thorne said. "Do you realize that in a few more days, unless we're found, we'll have to abandon our spacesuits?"

"That doesn't concern me as much as the reasons why we've been treated as we have. How would they know we couldn't find our way back? For that matter, is it conceivable that our companion, born and brought up not far from here, would become lost? There's only one really sensible thing that could account for what's happened. If they wanted to talk with the monster in the lake without our overhearing they would have to make sure we were twenty or thirty miles away, out of hearing!"

"You are quite correct."

THE NEW voice, speaking German, sounded over their suit radios. At the same time the hairdred's head turned, his huge black eyes looking through the trees.

Lansing and Thorne followed the direction of his gaze. They saw a slight movement. It resolved itself into a figure approaching on the ground. A figure in a spacesuit.

Or was it a robot?

It had two legs and two arms, incredibly long in proportion to body length, and encased in glistening cream-colored plastic. It had a spherical headgear that reflected light in flashes from its outer surface like plastiglass. But it wasn't transparent. Its inner surface was silvered.

"One-way glass," Lansing said, disappointed.

There was a soft laugh. "Sorry," the visitor said in German. "It's standard equipment."

He was taller than either Lansing or Thorne. His legs were four feet long, his body two feet long, with his head adding another foot to his height. Strapped to his back was a helicopter lift.

Two guns nestled in holsters at his hips. They were smaller than those Lansing and Thorne had had, but of a similar design.

"Now then," he said in German, his voice abruptly impersonal, "answer a few questions. And tell the truth. We thought we knew of every dome in the whole world. Evidently we don't. Where are you from?"

"We're from a spaceship," Lansing said. "The *Astral Traveler*. My name is Dr. Lansing. This is Andrew Thorne."

"There was such a ship," the stranger mused, "built three thousand years ago, that left the Earth. It was never heard from again. Don't tell me.... You do have the ancient norm in shape. It's just possible."

"This is something. By the way, my name's John Baker. We'd better get you to the dome so you can get

out of your suits and have a good bath."

OTHER SHAPES identical with John Baker were approaching through the trees now. Baker's body turned toward the hairdred Fred.

"You will go back to your reservation at once," Baker's voice ordered in English.

The giant's eyes turned to Lansing, glistening with unshed tears. His firm British lips, reincarnated into flesh from an era thirty centuries in the Earth's past by the eternal shuffle of the deck of Life, opened twice without uttering a sound. Then, "Good-bye, Dr. Lansing." It was choked and muffled. He turned away and started through the trees, his massive frame swaying from side to side as he walked on his squat legs. Dr. Lansing's eyes were moist as he whispered, "Goodbye, Fred."

"It's only a short distance from here to the tube entrance," Baker said.

Surrounded by the long-legged men, Lansing and Thorne were led through the trees. They had gone little more than a mile when they came to a stop. A few seconds later a rectangular section of the ground lifted straight up.

An elevator emerged slowly from the ground. They all stepped on the platform. The elevator sank slowly. When the earth roof had closed, it was dark for a while. There was a sensation of dropping as the elevator speeded down.

Abruptly it was slowing to a stop and light was everywhere, revealing a concrete tunnel and something Lansing and Thorne had seen in pictures, a long car that ran on parallel steel rails.

Baker reached up and gave his mirrored headgear a half turn and lifted it off. His grinning face was thin but entirely human.

"You can get out of your suit now," he said. "We're free of contamination down here."

"No Carbon-14?" Lansing asked.

"Even less than the normal atmosphere of thirty centuries ago," Baker said. "Every atom of carbon within the aquarium, as we call it, was derived from petroleum that had been in the ground for millions of years. We lean over backwards here inside."

The others were taking off their silvered domes and plastic suits. And all of them were so much alike in shape and features that they might have been identical n-tuplets.

"Go ahead," Baker said.

Thorne took off his helmet and breathed deeply. "Wonderfull!" he said.

Hesitantly, Lansing did the same.

The car started and was quickly travelling at top speed, the walls of the tunnel blurred as they shot past. At regular intervals the tunnel widened to a momentary glimpse of a loading platform.

"Other exits," Baker explained. "We have subways radiating out in all directions from the dome. The dome itself is something we're quite proud of. It was built by laying it over the surface of a large hill a little at a time, transplanting the vegetation to the outer surface as it was laid. Vertical shafts were bored and filled with reinforcing rods and then concrete. When the whole dome was completed the hill was mined out from underneath. Not even daily survey flights of enemy planes could have detected its construction. That was done perhaps less than a century after your ancestors on the *Astral Traveler* left, but we're still proud of it."

"That's something we want to find out about," Lansing said. "The

picture I have so far is not one I can sympathize with. As I understand it, there is an atom pile in operation that keeps the air, and consequently all life outside the dome, contaminated with radio-active carbon. That could only be so if it were done deliberately."

"You're tired, Dr. Lansing," Baker said.

"And upset," Lansing said. "But I still want to know if that's right."

"Let's put it this way for now," Baker smiled. "Not so much deliberately as from necessity. You're a scientist. Suppose we let it drop at that until you have had time to rest and get at all the facts. Your strain of humanity has been away from the Earth for three thousand years and is completely out of touch with us and our problems. Don't you think it unfair to form snap judgements based on values that are now, at best, unknown?"

"All right," Lansing grumbled. "I agree I'll be in a better mood to observe after a good rest and some decent food. Pill energy isn't satisfying. But I'm warning you ahead of time that neither I nor any of us from the *Astral Traveler* will show any sympathy toward a plan of deliberate contamination of everything outside a protected dome."

"THIS IS more like home, isn't it?" Lansing said to Thorne after Baker had left them. But before Thorne could answer, a knock at the door jerked both men around.

"Come in," Lansing said.

They watched as the knob twisted and the door opened slowly. Thorne saw who it was first and gasped.

It was Balu, clad in a protective suit with thin transparent plastic over her wings.

"Hello," she said hesitantly, smile

ing. "I wanted to meet you, and tell you that I brought your companion back to you. I didn't understand. I'm sorry."

"You brought Grant back?" Lansing said. "Where is he?"

"In the dome hospital. He's being decontaminated. You see, I thought he must be from another dome. An enemy one. I had no way of knowing anything else, did I? Everything pointed to it. The pile-powered airship hovering in the air...."

"You—you're wearing a suit," Thorne said.

"Of course," Balu said. "When I'm in the dome I must wear it to keep from contaminating the dome atmosphere. Would you like to see Ted? He's quite ill." She smiled ruefully. "I guess we have a few bugs his system isn't equipped to handle."

"Lead the way," Lansing said.

"He looks terrible," Balu explained as they walked down the corridor. "He picked up some ancient disease called spotted fever that the human race has been immune to for ages. But he'll be rid of it in a matter of hours, and they're decontaminating him. Flushing him out thoroughly. Very little C-14 will have lodged in him, and the doctors say it won't affect his offspring. But the dose he had was enough to make him crazy enough to lose himself like this. But he'll be all right now."

"Afterward," she said, "I'm to take you to the banquet they are making ready for you."

IT WAS a large room, perhaps thirty by fifty feet, with a fifteen-foot ceiling and paneled walls that several artists had spent their lives decorating. A large horseshoe table went around the room. A smaller table was at its apex. Every seat was filled except those at the head of the

smaller table, where three empty chairs stood.

Balu led the way there and sat on the backless stool between two hand-carved seats that had obviously been reserved for Lansing and Thorne.

They sat down. Their eyes roamed the hall while their minds tried to accept what they saw. It defied acceptance. There were two hundred people. They were quite obviously cultured, civilized, and intelligent. They were dressed in attire that had an approach to uniformity of style.

Balu stood up and raised a hand for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Council," she said. "I wish to introduce Dr. Lansing and Andrew Thorne, of the spaceship *Astral Traveler* which has just returned to the planet of its birth after a journey of three thousand years."

Lansing looked at the long line of faces. In the whole room there was no distinguishing feature that could be called animal, other than Balu's taloned paws of hands. But the wildest flight of fancy could not have conceived of the variety of shapes represented there.

"Dr. Lansing and Mr. Thorne," Balu went on, "are representative of their race, our parent race, just as each of you is a male or female of each one of our stabilized forms." She flashed a warning smile to Lansing. "Right now, our guests are hungry. I'd suggest we all eat. Afterward we can get acquainted with the star travelers."

Neither Lansing nor Thorne noticed the food he ate, except to note that the potatoes had a better flavor than those grown in the tanks on the *Astral Traveler*. The other vegetables were also of good flavor, but strange. The meat was laboratory beef very

much like that he had eaten all his life.

WHEN THE plates had been taken away, a man sitting across the table from them who had seemed quite short stood up. His legs were pipstems five feet long. His features were crowded in under a bulbous forehead from under which gazed quite normal blue eyes. When he spoke his voice was a baritone, clipped and efficient.

"I have been made acquainted with your reactions to us here on Earth so far," he said. "As President of the Council, I have been delegated to give you a quick picture of what's happened since your branch of the race left the planet.

"Briefly, there were several global wars. Atomic weapons were a terrible thing. The human race was not ready for them and perhaps would never be ready for them. About two centuries after your ship left, the final bid for world supremacy was made by one of the race-conscious nations. It chose the best of its population and built protected domes for them to live in. It then put into operation a plan no other power group had dared try. Universal contamination. It chose radioactive carbon as being the easiest contaminant to produce in great quantities, and the one that, in the form of carbon dioxide, would spread all over the world. Experiment had already shown that a rather small concentration of it would be disastrous. Experiments on small animals had shown that almost invariably in two or three generations the offspring were so deformed they were born dead or were unable to successfully grow to adulthood.

"Further, C-14 would die out more rapidly than any other of the workable radioactives, so that when the

clean-up campaign was over the world could be restored to habitability and repopulated with this one race of people.

"For over twenty years they built up their supply of radioactive carbon, while they were constructing their domed cities along the same lines as this one we live in. Then, without fanfare, they released it. Of course it was immediately detected. That was to be expected. It wasn't in lethal quantities. It was presumed it would be quickly absorbed by the world's forests. There was no alarm. In fact, no one knew exactly what country had released it.

"It was considered impossible for enough to be produced to do any real damage. Too late it was found out that this was a false conclusion. Too late other countries built domed sanctuaries. And then what this country had expected happened. In the battle to live in those sanctuaries against C-14, they became citadels under constant attack, changing hands often, with their inhabitants massacred. That happened to some extent even in the country that masterminded the scheme, but the planners had hidden the nucleus of their planned humanity well, and it remained for the most part undiscovered and safe.

"In five hundred years the human race was reduced to total savagery, and its numbers reduced to the point where whole bands of savages could live out their lives without meeting another group. Mortality was high, and continually growing. It is estimated that only one out of five thousand born alive was capable of living for more than a few minutes.

"But Nature had an answer ready-made for this attack. By the very nature of things, the evolution produced by C-14 explored every possibility and every path of possibility, upward

and downward on the ladder of change.

"Genius persisted too. Here and there a mastermind perceived the Whole. Wrecked dome cities were repaired. Petroleum was the source of stable Carbon. And in this environment of stable Carbon new varieties that had come into existence were developed into permanent human strains. You see many of them here. There are others in the interconnected domed cities of the American continents.

"With the growth of our new order of humanity grew a realization of the errors of the past. With it also grew a perception of the destiny that the last of the aggressors had embarked the race upon: the searching out of all the races potential to mankind.

"We could not turn back the pages of time. We could either arrest the progression of evolution by permitting the C-14 to die out naturally after we sought out and destroyed the criminal race, or we could carry on until it became certain no new mutation could be produced.

"By vote we chose to continue the experiment. Under our charter of world government at the turn of every century, we vote again. So far that vote has been for continuation. Do you have any questions?"

"DID YOU ever find the hidden cities of those who started all this?" Lansing asked.

"A thousand years ago the last was found and all its inhabitants destroyed."

"Then there are no more like us on the Earth?"

"No. The parent strain was unstable to begin with and didn't survive. I am of the opinion, though, that the world will welcome you of the *Astral Traveler* back into the family of races

and make a place for you as you are. Am I right?"

There was thunderous applause.

Lansing stood up slowly, his face expressionless. "You must realize," he said, "that I am not actually a spokesman for all of us. In fact, Mr. Thorne here, and I, and our companion now in your hospital, are merely scouts sent down to find out what's happened on the Earth. Therefore, I think the proper course would be for us to return to the ship we landed in and inform our superiors of what we have found. They in turn can make what decisions they think best."

The spokesman stood up again, smiling. "I agree with you," he said. "But we would like to know what you think personally. We realize of course that it must be a shock to you. Human values have changed. It was inevitable."

"Yes," Lansing said. "They've changed. But..." He paused and looked over his audience. Suddenly he smiled. "I'm sure you won't have anything to worry about."

There was more applause. A buzz of conversation rose in the room. Lansing caught snatches of it and found none of it to be in English. He had wondered about English being used after so long a time. Now he guessed that it was probably a dead language preserved or revived because all the scientific knowledge of three thousand years ago was in that language.

The spokesman stood up again. "Just as you cannot speak with authority for all your people, so I cannot at this time. But just as you hold out hopes of friendly reunion, so I feel strongly that I can promise full incorporation of the inhabitants of the *Astral Traveler* into the society of Earth's humanity with full citizenship."

IT WAS three days later. The ship had been contacted by radio and was waiting. Grant, though still weak, was well enough to travel. His space-suit had been found and brought to the dome city. And now an atom-powered helicopter from the city's own fleet, loaded with dozens of reels of film and other carefully chosen samples of Earth civilization, was ready.

Lansing shook hands with one after another of the varied humans, a smile carefully fixed on his lips, his eyes unexpressive. And each was warm in his invitation for him personally to return.

At the end of the line was Balu. Lansing took her thick paw clumsily.

"I wish to talk with you a moment before you leave," she said.

"All right."

They moved away from the others.

"You are a little like me," Balu said abruptly. "It may be because you have lived a long time yourself."

"I'm sure you overrate me," Lansing said, smiling.

"No. I don't think so." Her violet eyes were serious. So close to her, seeing her eternally youthful face, he found it difficult to believe her centuries old. "I don't think so," she said. "You have no doubt noticed that they carefully avoided mention of the fact that I am one race of man that hasn't succeeded in breeding true. The immortal who doesn't achieve immortality by continued growth. Maybe it's because there has never been a male of my species. But it does make me an alien among them. Just as you are."

"Nonsense," Lansing said cheerfully. "I've watched them. In a way, you're their queen. In the city and outside. All of them."

"Their pet," Balu smiled. "Take me with you, Dr. Lansing."

"Take you with me!" He blinked at her in surprise. "Why, my dear, I—I'll—"

"You won't be back," Balu whispered. "I know it. I see it in your eyes. Take me with you. I'll undergo surgery to remove my wings. I'll have these animal hands amputated and wear artificial ones. I'll wear dark glasses to hide my eyes."

"But I will be back," he insisted.

She shook her head. "You will tell them of Oldred and the hairdred. They will see things in those movies you are taking along. I know what will happen. Even if the others don't. And..." She rested a paw on his chest. "I have lived a long time. I have given myself to children to further their game of exploration of the paths of evolution of mankind. They are all children. Babies in a mixed-up cosmos where they try to convince themselves that everything is all right so they won't be afraid. But now I am tired. I want to rest. Take me with you..."

She faced him straight. As he looked into her eyes and realized what she was trying to tell him, he felt like crying. "My dear," he said softly. "It would never work out. We belong to two different times. And it would be wrong to try to put them together. Believe me—it's better this way."

She stood motionless.

"Goodbye, Balu," he said gently. "Goodbye, my dear. And thank you."

When he stepped into the helicopter he turned and looked over the heads of the farewell committee. Balu was still standing where he had left her.

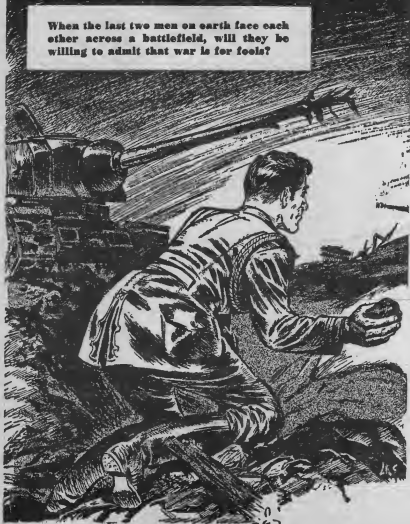
He lifted his hand and waved.

For a moment she didn't move. Then her arm came up. She waved hesitantly, and smiled tremulously.

With his eyes still on her, he closed the door.

NO MEDAL FOR

When the last two men on earth face each other across a battlefield, will they be willing to admit that war is for fools?



CAPTAIN MANNING



By William P. McGivern

ON THE MORNING that contact with N sector was broken, Captain Manning was resting in his lead-walled cubicle about a mile beneath what was once Butte, Montana. He didn't know then that N was out of contact, of course. He knew that K and L were gone—they'd been out of touch two months now—but he didn't know about N.

Captain Manning had been ten years old when the war started. Now he was thirty-six, a lean, graying man with tired eyes and unhealthy looking

skin. The vitamins and sun lamps never seemed to help him much. He hadn't been above ground, except for a few short plane trips, in more than twenty years and he sometimes felt that one breath of real air and a touch of sunlight would do more for him than all the artificial stimulants in the world.

That was silly, of course. It was demonstrable by scientific tables that human beings thrived in an underground existence. Yet Captain Manning still yearned occasionally for a

look at the sky and the smell of leaves. A psychiatrist once had told him that his feeling was natural and normal, and to stop worrying about it. Living underground was an adjustment to the facts of the war, and while adjustments were necessary and practical, one didn't have to like them *in toto*. That was the way the psychiatrist had put it. Captain Manning had liked the psychiatrist, a bluff, capable man with the odd name of Blackapple. Dr. Blackapple had left several years ago, now, but his replacement had never arrived.

The psychiatric corps was understaffed and overworked, of course, since life underground had precipitated all sorts of emotional and psychic disorders; but Captain Manning had never forgiven N sector for not sending some one to take Blackapple's place. Psychiatrists weren't the best-natured people in the world, in fact they were notoriously crabby and irritable, but it was oddly sustaining to know that they were around.

Captain Manning got up from his bunk and prepared to shave, reflecting that the loss of sectors K and L had been an unexpected boon to their unit. It eased the strain enormously, since there were just two of them now, the colonel and himself, to handle a communications point that had once been staffed with twenty-three men.

They weren't sure of course that K and L were gone in the final sense of the word. It could be simply a mechanical breakdown, although that was a slim probability. K—the British Isles and parts of Europe—had taken a terrific blast about a year ago and it was common gossip that they were in a bad way. L—parts of China, Indonesia, and a few stations in the Pacific—had always been in one mess after another, so their present difficulties were not remarkable.

However, in spite of the easier work schedule, Captain Manning missed the chap from K, a Major Blinn. Blinn had a deep hard voice with undercurrents of humor running through it like a bright thread in tweed cloth. Blinn was younger than Captain Manning, twenty-eight, and of course knew nothing at all of life above the ground. He asked endless questions and Manning told him all he could remember—of the look of the Earth's curve from a height, of ships and water, traffic, trees, birds, and the feel of wind. The thought of wind fascinated Blinn. Wind, cold, capricious wind blowing hard, then soft, disappearing to return in a sudden swift blast; the inconsistency of it delighted the Englishman.

CAPTAIN MANNING finished shaving, dressed and had breakfast—two red pills and one blue with a glass of water—and then walked along the solid steel tunnel to the communications center.

Colonel Hewitt, a short, stocky man with thin gray hair and irritable eyes, was staring at sector N's message panel when Captain Manning entered. He nodded abruptly and pointed to the panel which was dark. "What do you make of that?" he asked in a far too casual voice.

Captain Manning stared at the dark panel for a few seconds without comprehension. The implications were too enormous to grasp. Finally, he said, "When did it happen?"

"About two hours ago."

"Is our equipment all right?"

"Yes, yes, of course it's all right," the colonel answered, and glared at him. "N is out—gone. That's all."

All! Sector N was merely Headquarters for the United States and South America. It also controlled Canada and Hawaii before those areas were eliminated. It was located near

Guatemala. But N couldn't be in trouble. It just couldn't. Commands from Sector N had arranged Captain Manning's life since he was a boy. The planning for all sectors was done at N, and Congress and Parliament had convened there until their decisions and arguments became so patently pointless that they adjourned for the duration.

"They had trouble there a few months ago, remember?" Colonel Hewitt said, and glared at Manning again as if he were responsible for it.

Captain Manning thought, K, L, and now N! That left only two sectors remaining—Y and M. Y was a chain of islands in the Pacific with a central base at Australia. He glanced at Y's panel quickly, saw that it was dark.

"Yes, it's gone too," the colonel said, intercepting his look. "It's faded with N. That leaves M."

M sector. There were no personnel there. M was a gigantic man-made island in the Atlantic, operated by remote control. It was totally self-sufficient. It made fuel, bombs, missiles; and its launching sites operated around the clock, needing only the firing data from sector N for directional purposes.

Captain Manning remembered that when M had been put into operation everyone thought there might be a chance for an armistice, peace. But the enemy developed M sectors, too, and the stalemate continued.

Now only M was left. Pure function, independent of cause and effect, had outlasted everything else.

"Have you checked N with the detector?" Manning asked suddenly.

"No, no, I forgot," the colonel said, relief in his voice.

They went into an adjoining room and Manning snapped on an overhead light. On one wall was a circular screen and attached to its face was an indicator needle, resting now in

the vertical position.

Colonel Hewitt snapped a switch on an instrument panel at the base of the screen, and watched hopefully as the indicator needle moved toward the quadrant in which sector N lay.

Based on the principle of radar, the detector reacted to the electrical impulses of the human mind, and was employed in artillery and bombing computations to determine maximum enemy density at given points. Manning realized that they hadn't used it since their unit had been used as a training section. That was several years back.

He glanced over the colonel's shoulder and saw that the response from N was feeble and erratic.

"Damn it!" the colonel cried, swinging on him angrily. "This can't be right, Manning."

"Try the enemy sectors," Manning suggested.

The indicator needle described a one hundred and eighty degree arc to reach the region of the enemy. There the response was lively and firm.

The colonel rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "It—it just doesn't seem possible," he muttered.

There was little point in arguing with the evidence, Manning felt. It was quite plain that sector N was done for. And it was equally plain that the enemy was in excellent shape.

THEY RETURNED to the communications center where the colonel stood frowning at N's dark panel. "What do you think happened?" he said, in a strangely weak voice.

"We had trouble a few months ago," Manning said. "It must have been worse than we thought."

"Yes, I suppose," the colonel said, shaking his head.

Captain Manning shrugged. "Well, there's nothing we can do now. Why

don't you get some sleep? I'll call you if anything happens."

When the colonel had gone, Manning checked the equipment, noted that the regular signal was being beamed to all sectors, and then sat down and wondered how to pass the time.

Once they had been busy here, transmitting weather data, scrambling and unscrambling data between various sectors, but their operations had become more limited each year and now their only job was to wait for orders which never came.

Manning wondered if the war was coming to an end. Maybe it *was* over, the enemy victorious. That seemed a likely conclusion with K, L, Y and N gone. His interest was casual since the war had not concerned him very much for the past fifteen or twenty years. That was true with most people, of course. The war was like the wind or rain, a thing that existed arbitrarily, beyond the will or control of those exposed to it.

Dr. Blackapple had once told him that the indifference of the people to the war was the most grave phenomenon he had observed.

"The unique attribute of men is that they care about things," Dr. Blackapple had said, but that made no sense to Captain Manning.

Now he thought about the enemy, believing suddenly that the war was over. He knew who the enemy was, by name at least, but the enemy had changed a dozen times since the start of the war, and he had long since stopped following their torturous alignments, realignments, divisions and subdivisions.

Captain Manning's father had talked a lot about the enemy before the war, predicting trouble of a horrendous nature, and yet, when the trouble did come, it came from an unlikely and unexpected source. His

father had come some one night with a paper that announced in black, screaming headlines that an atomic bomb had been used in an otherwise insignificant border squabble in South America.

That had set off an emotional chain reaction in America. People with money had shelters built in their back yards or in inaccessible areas which were thought at that time to be more safe than densely populated regions.

Real estate combines constructed hotels hundreds of feet under the ground, complete with night clubs, swimming pools and tennis courts, and to these subterranean palaces the rich came in hysterically gay droves. However, human safety became an explosive issue overnight and the underground retreats of the rich were bitterly criticized. Certain groups defended them, asserting that privately owned atom shelters were a symbol of free American enterprise, while the opposition maintained that the welfare of all the people came first, even though that meant abrogating traditional constitutional rights.

It was an academic point after the first bomb hit America. Then it became obvious that the job of getting a nation underground couldn't be done without subordinating every ounce of industrial and human power to a master blueprint enforced by the government. Rich and poor wanted something over their heads, and they didn't care who did the job, as long as it was done fast.

CAPTAIN MANNING got up from his chair, looked over the equipment again, initialed the report chart and then sat down and stared at sector N's dark panel.

He thought: now there's no one left but the enemy. And the colonel, of course. Involuntarily, he glanced to the short wave sets. He could get in

touch with the enemy quite easily. But what would be the point? Captain Manning didn't care about the enemy. He didn't care about anything.

After all, how was it possible to care about a war whose very nature was inconclusive, pointless? At the outbreak, he recalled, there had been slogans and speeches and martial music, and everybody was tremendously excited and interested. News, news, news! That was all one could get on television or radio.

When cities were smashed to powder the news was screamed and flashed into every home. Casualties were estimated, damages evaluated and the significance of the destruction was analyzed by experts. Captain Manning remembered the tension he felt when London was eliminated, and then the shocking news about New York. But as the years passed and events repeated themselves, the news fell into a gray, predictable pattern. Things happened, and caused other things to happen, and so on. People lost interest as New York was followed by Lima, Stalingrad, Quebec, Chicago, Brussels, Hawaii, Detroit, Butte, Shanghai, Melbourne, San Francisco—the litany was endless. The war lost its element of tension and surprise. As the years dragged on it became a flat, stale affair, and people tried to live around it anyway they could.

Colonel Hewitt appeared in the doorway, his white hair rumped and his tunic collar open. He glanced at the dark panels and said unnecessarily, "No change, eh?"

Manning shook his head. He and the colonel had never gotten on well, and he decided now it was because the old man was a fool. He had never adjusted to the war, but still rambled on about what things had been like before it started. About his wife,

and the job he had had with an insurance company, and his teen-aged boy and married daughter. The colonel was frequently irritable, inconsistent, querulous and tumultuous. He had to be concerned and involved with life. Manning perceived with some charity that the old man was conditioned by events before the war in a society that had not quite surrendered to mindless routine.

Now the colonel glared at him and said, "What the devil does this mean, Manning? Are the people on all our sectors dead? If they're not dead, why don't they answer our signals? Are the signals strong enough?"

"Yes, they're strong enough," Manning said.

"Damn," the colonel said explosively. He paced the floor, a choleric red stain spreading upward from his throat. "That's just like our double-damned top echelon," he said savagely. "It's always the same, I tell you, Manning. They plan and decide and act wise as owls, so far above us they don't even see us, but when the trouble comes—where are they? Damn it, where are they?"

Captain Manning shrugged. "They're probably dead," he said.

The colonel looked at him and then turned away, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I don't understand you. I never have. I have never understood you younger men. You say a thing like that as you'd ask for a glass of water. You don't care one way or the other, do you?" He wheeled suddenly, a beseeching, frightened look on his face. "It's unnatural. None of you care."

Captain Manning said quietly, "Well, there's nothing much we can do anyway."

"I suppose you're right," the colonel said dully. He turned away with a helpless shrug. "I—I'm going back to my room for a while."

ALONE, Captain Manning checked the instruments again and then sat down and stretched his legs out comfortably. He found himself feeling sorry for the colonel. What had the old boy said? Unnatural. That was it.

Captain Manning smiled. He thought of a girl he had known in a math class when he was seventeen. Now, after nineteen grey and uneventful years, he could still remember her soft hair and slender, patient hands. Nothing had come of their brief friendship. He had gone off to communications school and hadn't heard from her again. It hadn't been too difficult. The ODC—Office of Diet Control—was by then treating all food with a sex repressive. Untreated food was available under prescribed circumstances, and there was, of course, a lively black market in it at all times. But most of the people didn't need it, and didn't want it in fact, for the pressures it released were more trouble than they were worth. Captain Manning wondered what had become of the girl. Nancy, her name was.

Human nature didn't change, Captain Manning knew, because it didn't exist. What man became was the result of capricious circumstance.

He checked the equipment again, studying sector N's dark panel in particular. It still didn't seem possible that N was gone. What all-destructive weapon had the enemy discovered? And how had his side overlooked it?

A weak cry from the corridor made him start. He hurried out and found Colonel Hewitt slumped on the floor clutching his breast with both hands.

"Heart," he gasped. "Medicine..."

Captain Manning ran down the corridor to the colonel's room, grabbed a bottle of tablets and a glass of water from the bedside table, and then hurried back to where the old

man lay moaning.

He got a tablet into his mouth and forced water in after it. The colonel choked once and Captain Manning thought he was done for. But the stimulant caught hold in time. The breathing came easier.

"I'll help you to your room," Captain Manning said.

Later, Manning returned to the communications room. He didn't think the old man would last long. He was comfortable but nothing else could be done for him. Automatically, he checked the instruments and message panels. K, L, Y, and N were still out. M's signal was flashing methodically.

Captain Manning stared at it for a few seconds, frowning. Why, if the enemy were victorious, hadn't he knocked out M? The enemy couldn't ignore M. That would be against the law, the law of total war, which meant total destruction.

He walked over to the short-wave set and put a tentative hand on one switch. The idea of sending a signal to the enemy was curiously exciting. He smiled for a few seconds for no particular reason, and then flipped the switch that put it in action.

The enemy would get the signal instantly and locate the section almost as quickly. But Captain Manning didn't care.

He put a headset on and sat down before the radio. In a clear voice he gave his position, call letters and identification. Then he said, "Come in, please. Standing by."

THE ROOM was quiet and still.

Captain Manning sat motionless, waiting for the enemy's answer. But no answer came. He repeated the message three times and then, frowning, removed the headset and got to his feet. For a few moments he paced the floor indecisively. Into all sectors of the earth and to all stations on land,

sea or in the sky, the messages from the panels and radio were being sent; and there was no answer. The world was still as death. Only M, the robot, was responding.

Suddenly, Manning turned and hurried into the adjoining room. Facing the director screen he wondered why this hadn't occurred to him immediately. He set the gauges, and snapped on the switch, and then raised his eyes as the indicator needle began a slow sweep of the screen.

There was no response from N. None from Y, L, or K. Fascinated, he watched the needle enter the enemy quadrant, and when he glanced at the gauges he felt a definite physical shock. There was no response from the enemy regions.

Everyone must be dead. The more he thought about it the more plausible it seemed. Probably N had launched a gigantic counter-attack in its own death throes, or maybe the two antagonists had simultaneously discovered the ultimate in destructive agents, and simultaneously unleashed it on each other.

Manning turned off the detector. The idea that the war was over, that everyone was dead struck him as preposterous. And slightly amusing.

Later, he looked in on the colonel and found the old man resting quietly.

"Nothing is happening," he said. He didn't want to disturb him with what he'd learned.

"It's all over," the colonel said wearily. "If they aren't answering, it's because there's no one alive to answer. They're all dead."

Manning didn't answer.

The colonel was silent for several moments and then he began to speak of his wife in a calm, lucid manner. He talked of how well she looked in blue frocks, and how well she drove a car, and how their home seemed to brighten up when she came in. Man-

ning, bending low over the old man, saw that his eyes were blank and unseeing. Two hours later the colonel went into a coma and died without regaining consciousness.

Manning injected preservative fluid into the body at several points and then went out and closed the door behind him. He felt no regret at the colonel's death, but only a slight relief that the old man had gone without knowing the final pointlessness of the war to which he had given his life.

Now, Manning thought with a faint smile, he was the last man on earth. He walked back to the communications center feeling that it was a pointless distinction.

FOR TWO DAYS he followed his regular schedule because he had nothing else to do and habit was strong. The hours passed uneventfully. It wasn't until the start of the third day—when the ration machine stopped working—that he knew he couldn't live indefinitely in this underground retreat.

Manning hadn't been trained to operate or repair the ration machine, his knowledge about it was theoretical. He understood that air, water and infra-red rays were transformed in some manner into tablets that supplied ninety per cent of the body's needs. But the colonel, who had taken a special six-month course in the maintenance of the machine, had been responsible for its operation and always kept it functioning flawlessly.

Also Manning noticed that he had begun to perspire, which meant that the air-conditioning unit was not functioning properly. He looked into that trouble and was able to fix it—it was only a stuck valve, fortunately—but had the difficulty been more serious he would have been helpless.

The situation was wryly amusing. He had lived his entire sentient life

with the conviction that machines served him; yet, in reality, the opposite was true.

There were many things Manning knew about his specialty, communications; but his knowledge wasn't general, and he knew that he'd have to go above ground if he wanted to survive.

Once that thought occurred to him he was filled with a strange excitement. It wasn't survival that mattered so much, but he wanted to see the sun and sky, to be above ground once more.

He made the preparations hastily. Impregnated clothing, a Geiger watch, helmet, pistol, and a bottle of rations. That was all. But once he was ready to go above, he paused, suddenly nervous. He couldn't shake off a lifetime of conditioning so quickly. Above was the arena, the deadly battleground he had been taught to fear. Open spaces, plateaus and meadows were the common symbols of his nightmares.

But now there was nothing to fear, he thought, reasoning the matter calmly. Now there was nothing above to hurt him. Everyone was dead. Yet Manning was still uneasy. Finally, he walked back to the detector screen, determining to make sure that there was no evidence of human life in the area.

He snapped on the switch and watched the indicator needle begin its circle. His jittery feeling passed as all the gauges remained at zero. Then, suddenly, there was a response. A tiny, one-unit response. Manning bent over the gauge, hardly believing his eyes. But, yes, it was true. One human being still lived. It couldn't be his own impulse the machine was responding to, he knew. The detector had an automatic correction for its operator. Somehow he had missed this response in his last check.

Excited, he turned to a directional gauge and plotted the position of the impulse on a grid. He made a pin-point calculation and saw that this last remaining human being was in the immediate area, not more than half a mile from the entrance of the tunnel Manning would use in going above.

For several seconds he stood thinking about this person who had somehow escaped the universal destruction. Friend or foe, man or woman, he had no way of knowing. But he began to feel a curious, happy anticipation as he hurried back to the elevator.

By himself Manning knew he could do little but prolong his own life. But as he shot upward he thought that, with another human being to work with, it could be different. Together they might find a habitable area and, pooling their knowledge, work out some sort of free, safe existence. They could stay above the ground permanently, perhaps, and build shelters and learn how to farm the land.

THE HEAVY leaden door swung outward with a protesting creak and Manning stepped into sunlight, pale, golden-yellow, autumn sunlight. He stood still, feet rooted in the velvety gray ash that covered the ground, and stared upward at the cold cloud-flecked sky.

They hadn't destroyed the sky, he thought. Probably because they hadn't known how. Had they found a way to sunder it, to smash it and reshape it in the form and color of death, then nothing could have saved the sky.

On all sides of him the earth rolled away in waves of dry, flaky ash, with here and there fragments of buildings jutting up like the masts of sunken ships. The Geiger counter indicated that the area was safe, so he removed his helmet and let the wind

blow against his face. He remembered the Englishman, Blinn, then, who couldn't imagine the wind, couldn't understand its inconstancy.

Manning turned slowly, looking for a human figure. But he saw no one. The horizons were desolated, unbroken. Then Manning saw a hill in the distance and set off for it with rapid strides, thinking that from there he would have a view for miles.

He topped a shallow rise after walking about fifty yards and saw a figure coming toward him, a man trudging up the incline, his head bowed, his arms working jerkily, tiredly. Manning threw himself down with the speed of a frightened animal. The man hadn't seen him. His heart was hammering painfully and the dry taste of fear was on his tongue. Why was he trembling? Why was he afraid? He asked himself the questions in a black panic. This man was like himself, a brother. He was the one Manning had come up to meet. The one he had happily hoped to live with in harmony.

Inching forward, he peered down from the crest of the hill. The climbing man had his helmet slung over his back and his curly blond hair glinted in the sunlight. Manning could see his insignia on a shoulder patch: Sector N, air arm.

Manning instinctively controlled his breathing while watching the climbing man and now, as he backed down from the crest of the rise, his movements were stealthy and silent. His fingers fumbled under the gray ash and found a smooth rock.

Gripping it, he suddenly noticed how perfectly the hand and the rock complemented each other. They were made to go together, he thought with excitement. The hand, so clumsy with a book or a flower, was transformed by a rock into an instrument of grace and meaning.

Now he heard the man's laboring

footsteps in the terrible stillness, and the fear caught at his throat again, almost cutting off his breath.

The man was close now, about ten feet from the crest, Manning judged. Eight....six....four.

Manning leaped to his feet and drew back the rock in one savage, coordinated motion.

The man cried, "God!" in fright and bewilderment, and threw out his hands in an instinctive gesture.

Manning saw the terror-twisted, boyish face, the blond, curling hair, damp with sweat near the scalp, and the thick lashes over the blue eyes. He shouted hoarsely and hurled the rock with all his strength. It struck the man squarely on the forehead and he fell backward, pressing both hands to his bleeding face and crying out.

Manning walked down the incline to where the man lay sprawled, and saw that the frontal area of his skull was fractured. Slender splinters of bone pressed through the flesh and blood darkened the ash under the man's head.

He straightened slowly, the fear and tension gone now, his body trembling weakly. He felt drained and empty. This murder had been fantastic, incredible, he realized.

For several minutes he stared at the still figure of the young man. Then his lips twisted bitterly. No, it hadn't been fantastic. It had been inevitable, fitting and typical.

He stood in the lonely silence staring at the desolate sweep of the earth broken only by the fragments of shattered buildings.

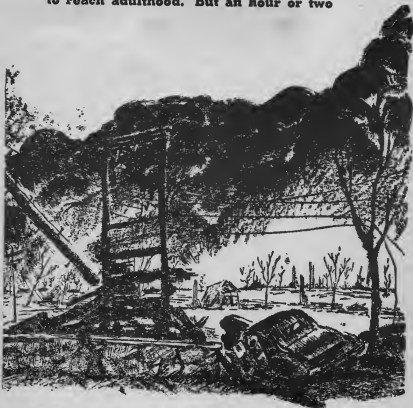
This was peace, he thought. The only possible peace.

Manning walked aimlessly toward the hill in the distance, his feet kicking up clouds of flaky ash, and as he walked he was unaware that his hand was fumbling slowly, inevitably, for the pistol at his waist.



THE DAY

Usually it takes years for a boy of pure hell made Johnny an old man . . . to reach adulthood. But an hour or two



THE BOMB FELL

By Leslie A. Crounch

JOHNNY kicked his way to school that bright spring morning, punishing a small round stone unmercilessly as he vented his boyish spleen.

"I wish I didn't have to go to

school," he was grumbling. "I wish it'd burn down. I wish the teacher'd get the mumps, or chicken pox, or somethin'."

He halted to look into the window of the big hardware store. What a

fine display of fishing tackle they had. Leaning against the curved corner where it turned in toward the entrance, he could hear the radio set on display within. Absent-mindedly he listened to the voice of the newscaster.

"...President Green remained in his office during the night, awaiting the latest reports of the tense European situation. Orders have gone out to all airdromes, cancelling all leaves..."

Johnny yawned. Ho hum! Adults were funny, sticking around a radio like that when it was so nice out. The sun was sure hot today. He'd like to go fishin'. He wondered if Pop would be home early like he said, to paint the garage. He liked painting.

The school bell yammered, its amplified electronic voice snapping him to awareness of the world he was a part of. He started to run, books swinging from the strap, banging against his legs, striking passers-by who turned to look after him, smiling.

He just made it. Luckily the school was just around the next corner. Puffing like one of the obsolete steam engines they had in the amusement park, he raced up the broad concrete walk and through the closing front doors. The caretaker shook his head at the human jet plane that shot by him, up the stairs, round the corner, into the room, to flop breathlessly into a seat half way up the aisle.

As the class mumbled its prayers, led by Miss Wilkinson, Johnny scanned the room, furtively, out of the corners of his eyes, wondering if any of his classmates had had the nerve to skip. Yep, Bert White was missing—and by golly, so was Tom Ketcheson. He counted them off in his mind: eight, nine, ten—Gee Whillikers, fifteen of them absent!

When the prayer was over, and the

salute to the flag, the door opened, allowing a boy to slip in. Miss Wilkinson saw him.

"You're late, Tom," she said, gently reproachful.

"Yes, Miss Wilkinson. My father had to leave."

They all knew what that meant. Things must be bad, thought Johnny, if they had had to send for Tom's pop. He was a colonel in the new air force, and had been home on leave. Suddenly he remembered the other boys' fathers were also officers, or enlisted men. Had they been sent for, was that why they hadn't come to school?

Miss Wilkinson was nervous. She kept dropping her chalk, and she made some funny mistakes in arithmetic that made the class snicker. And when some of the kids kept looking out of the windows, to the horizon and up at the sky, she said nothing. In fact, while they were studying, once, she stood near one of them, looking kind of white and scared. Johnny began wishing he'd listened to the radio with his mother and dad that morning. Something had come over it to make them worried, too. He wondered what it was.

AT TEN-THIRTY something happened that he knew he would never forget. He was sitting, his head on his hand, half asleep, looking out of the open windows. Far away, over the tall buildings of the downtown section, he could see needle-like fingers poking into the sky. They were the tall stacks of the huge plants about twenty miles away, staining the heat ridden horizon with smudgy stains. Suddenly, a terrifically bright light lit up the whole sky, making his eyes hurt. While he was rubbing them, he felt a blow, a hot, heavy, pushy feeling. Then the noise came. The whole school shook and decora-

tive, pastel-toned tile fell from the high ceiling. The girls started to cry and even Miss Wilkinson had tears in her eyes.

When Johnny could see again, he looked toward the place he had seen the light and there was a huge black cloud rising high in the sky. It was small down near the ground, but up above it rolled and boiled and swelled so it looked like the biggest toadstool ever.

As he watched, openmouthed, there came another terrible flash of the intense brightness, followed by the heavy breath of heat and the soul-shaking sound. This one came from another point on the line that divided earth and sky, over toward where there were more big factories, making very secret things that people didn't know much about. He scratched irritably. His skin was prickling and felt like he had a pretty bad case of sunburn. Another heavy cloud, big-topped, slim-based, was slowly climbing.

A wailing sound rose through the still morning air. It sounded kind of spooky, like a wind blowing through trees at night. Then he realized it was the sound of many people shouting and crying.

Miss Wilkinson shook him by the shoulder and pointed toward the door. He saw the others were leaving, hurried, yet orderly.

They got down the wide stairs and outside to be greeted by a new sound, equally frightening. It was a distant sighing, high up, that was steadily growing louder, nearer. He looked up, but could see nothing.

"Run!" Miss Wilkinson was suddenly crying. "Get into the cellars. Quickly now. There isn't a second to lose."

The children ran toward the concrete frames in the ground. Johnny and his chums had made many boyish

wagers as to their purpose. What interest they had caused, when, only a few short weeks before, crews of men had suddenly invaded the grounds, disturbing the classes with their loud voices and clanking machinery. Then they had departed, as mysteriously as they had come, leaving behind them the deep, concrete-walled, concrete-roofed rooms. The principal had talked over the amplifying system, telling them they were for special classes to be held underground some day. He had said when the time to use them came, the teachers would tell them to go to the cellars quickly, and they must—without hesitation, without delay.

Johnny stumbled, lurching sideways. He threw out his arm to catch himself, then the ground opened up and he tumbled into the deep cut that had been made for a new water main to the school. The breath jarred from him. He struggled to his feet and looked up.

He could see the bright blue sky and he was starting to shout when suddenly the blue was wiped out by a terrible wave of liquid fire washing overhead. The ground shook, sending him sprawling again. He could see—for one short second—pieces of boards, bits of clothing, even chunks of masonry sailing by. He thought for one brief instant, "It must be a tornado," before everything went black.

WHEN HE came to, it was night.

Sitting up, he nursed his aching head. His skin felt dry and burned and he had a terrible thirst. He got to his feet and found that, by standing on a large chunk of concrete that had fallen in, missing him by but a few inches, he could just reach the brink of the hole. He clawed for some time, hardly knowing what he was doing. Finally he managed to get a

hold and drew himself out.

The school—where was the school? It was gone. In its place was nothing but a strewn mass of broken masonry. He stumbled toward it, beset by a sudden sense of loss.

"Jeepers!" he thought. "I didn't really mean it!"

Turning slowly, he looked about and saw he could see for a long ways. For a minute this didn't strike as being unusual. Then he cried aloud. Everywhere was desolation, utter ruin, half obscured here and there by columns of smoke, through which red tongues licked.

Suddenly he was afraid. He wanted to get home to see if his mother was all right. He started to run, but progress was slow, halting. Rubble tripped him up. Fires forced lengthy detours. Twisted piles of scrap that had once been automobiles huddled here and there. Once he passed something that sat on a fragment of curbstone, clad in tattered shreds of clothing, moaning as it rocked to and fro. He saw its face, briefly, and his stomach turned over painfully.

There seemed to be hardly anything alive. A dog ran shrieking from his path, caroming blindly off wreckage, rolling over and over in the dust when its legs failed it.

Eventually he reached the street he lived on, almost beyond feeling. It was no better. Here and there a bit of wall still stood, miraculous paradox amid ruin. He stumbled wearily down what had once been a neat tree-lined street, until he reached where his home had stood.

But there was nothing left. Not a wall remained, not a shrub of the hedge his father had so lovingly tended. It looked as though a giant steam roller had passed this way, flattening everything, grinding it to dust, leaving only a hole where the cellar had been, from which a twisted bit of

pipng beckoned like a skeletal finger.

He didn't cry. He couldn't cry. Walking toward what had once been a comfortable home, he stared straight ahead, eyes dry, a tight feeling in his throat.

The front steps were still there, leading up their four steps to the platform formed of flat stone slabs, before which a door had been. A door with tiny stained glass windows and a huge, funny looking brass knocker. He gulped.

Slowly he sat down. Chin dropped to rest in a grimy hand. Eyes sought the horizon, bespeckled with peaceful looking stars, a pale glow heralding a rising moon.

A huge grey cat poked a frightened head around some debris, meowed disconsolately, looked up at him, then ran up the steps to crawl into his lap. Fingers caressed the fur and a friendly purr answered his administrations.

"You lonesome, too?" he asked. The cat rubbed his head against his leg. "Guess maybe your folks are gone too, huh?"

Far off toward where the harbor lay, where the big factory town was, he saw the beam of a searchlight shoot up, explore the night sky tentatively, then flick off. Then he heard the sighing sound of many planes, shooting high overhead. He strained his eyes but was unable to see any riding lights.

"I wonder if pop will come," he murmured. The cat stirred, licked his fingers.

SLOWLY the night passed the way of all nights since the world began, retreating finally before a lighting western sky. When it was light enough to see, he rose and, carrying the cat, walked slowly down the walk, turned up the street and, without a

backward look, headed toward the open country. He wasn't sure why he took that direction. He knew only that some faint compulsion seemed to force him to leave the shambles that had been a living, breathing community a short time before.

He walked for a long time, hardly conscious of his surroundings. Gradually he became aware of a gnawing hunger, a torturing thirst. And above it all, deadening his sensibilities, an aching loneliness that made him embrace the animal tightly from time to time. He saw nothing but wreckage, and the odd human, poking blindly about, stunned, unfeeling. He wondered for a time over what looked like a ghostly shadow, imprinted faintly on what was left of a concrete wall. He found a hole in the pavement filled with water by a slowly leaking main, and drank from it.

Once the sound of planes made him huddle in a ditch beside the road. He didn't know what he must fear. Only the knowledge that everything was strange. They shot by overhead, many of them, bearing no insignia, ominous, unfamiliar.

All this time he carried the animal, seeking in it comfort to fend off the loneliness that gnawed at his mind. Only once did he put it down, and that to drink. The cat didn't go away, but huddled close against his body and mourned softly until he picked it up again.

His skin itched and he scratched a great deal, but it only made the sensation worse. Finally he gave up.

It was late in the afternoon, judging by the sun, when he worked his way up a gradual slope and saw the farm house. It was all that remained of the buildings. He didn't know how it had escaped, since the other structures lay scattered for yards and yards over the fields.

Looking for signs of life, he slowly approached the door. A dog lay in the front yard, lifeless. The door, which faced the city, swung on one hinge, blackened, blistered as though from intense heat. No glass remained in any of the windows.

Johnny called out, loudly, listened, then called again and again. Peeking inside he saw a room filled with dust, littered with broken plaster from the ceiling and walls, the furniture strewn about.

He went around to the back. There he found a horse, huddled against the wall as though for comfort. It sensed his presence and tried to whinny but all that came forth was a sort of sobbing sound that made Johnny feel bad. Dried blood stained the animal's nostrils, and the hair on its foreparts was all gone, leaving the skin red and boiled looking, like the lobsters his mother used to prepare for dinner. It stretched its neck, slamming its head against the wall. It was blind.

The back door was closed. Placing his hand against it, he shoved it open on hinges that were well oiled. Inside he found a kitchen, with pots still on the stove, rolled-out dough on the table, a carton of smashed eggs on the floor.

Hunger grew sharply in him and he searched the kitchen for food. There was bread in the pantry and he took it out, also some cooked meat and a whole bologna sausage. This he tied up in a towel from a drawer in the table. In a frying pan in the warming closet of the stove he found some raw liver, which the cat did away with with great dispatch and efficiency.

HE WAS about to leave when the door leading to the rest of the house swung open and a girl appeared. She was about his own age, he reckoned, and she had red hair and a lot

of freckles across her nose and she looked pretty scared.

"Who are you?" Johnny asked.

"I'm Marianne. This is my home."

"I guessed that," he told her with all the superiority of the youthful male.

"Then why did you ask?"

He wasn't going to get anywhere this way, he told himself.

"Where's your mom and pop?" he asked.

Her face, which had been showing some animation stiffened and her upper lip trembled. She brushed the back of her hand across it and gave a sort of sniff.

"I guess they're kinda dead."

"Kinda dead? Doncha know if they are or not?"

She nodded.

"Dad's down by the barn." She looked out of the window and amended her statement. "Where the barn was, I mean. I saw him go into it and then the big noise came and it wasn't there anymore."

"Where's your mom?"

"She was going to make a pie when we saw the cloud way off there. We went to the window to see better, only she was right up close. I guess that's why I didn't get hurt. I was looking around her when the light came. She threw up her hands and made a funny sound, then she started to run around, bumping into things and falling down. I led her to the bedroom and she fell down and never got up again."

He tilted his head, listening. The planes were coming again, or maybe they were different ones. And there was another sound. A heavy kind of rumbling, like big guns, only more steady. Going to the window, he looked out. Toward the city he could see a low cloud of dust coming this way. Then, where the road went up over a little elevation, he saw the big things, a lot of them. They looked

like the tanks they had pictures of in the books at school, only these were much bigger. They were coming pretty fast, too.

"I guess we better go somewhere else," he said, and she nodded. They ran from the house, hand in hand.

"Maybe we can hide there." She pointed to what looked like a small bush, leading back from the house.

"It's pop's orchard. There's a kind of cave there, too, that an old river ran into before it dried up."

When they were safely among the neat rows of tree corpses, they halted and looked back, gasping for breath.

The cavalcade of tanks rolled up and one of them turned out and approached the house. Some men in strange uniforms got out. From where they were they looked black, like the planes, and were comprised of a baggy pair of breeches, sloppy coat with a belt and a brimless sort of hat or cap. There were markings on the collars but Johnny couldn't make them out. Some went into the house while the rest either stood and talked or prowled around, kicking pieces of rubble and laughing loudly. One of them found the old horse and called to his companions. They took out side arms and made practise shots at it till it finally fell.

"I hate them!" sobbed Marianne, intensely. Johnny nodded mutely.

"I guess maybe they're the ones who killed our parents," he said. "They're not our soldiers."

Smoke started coming out of the door, followed by red flame. Marianne would have jumped up if he hadn't held her down.

"They're burning my mom," she cried.

He watched the house burn and hot tears rolled down his dusty face. The cat, sensing his grief, cried softly and crept close.

"I guess maybe they're gonna burn everything," he whispered, little re-

Continued on page 131

INVADERS from the VOID

By Russell Branch

Because of one man's betrayal, Earth was a barren, conquered waste. There was only one way out: he must betray it again!

LIGHT HAD come, and darkness. But darkness alone could never hide this infection on the face of Earth, nor provide escape for the man who had brought it....

Ron Patterson stumbled hopelessly along the dim, deserted street. He suspected he was being followed, but what did that matter? What can life itself matter, to a man who has de-



stroyed a planet?

The evidence was all about him, despite the dark. It was the darkness itself, here in the once-brightest city of all. It was the feel of the slime-covered, rotting pavement beneath his feet. It was the stench, the swamp odor of death and decay which seemed to pervade even his oxygen mask. It was the inaudible whisper of a malignant growth as it spread and multiplied and destroyed.

Only a simple algae, the scientists had said at first. Or perhaps more of a fungus—but still no more to be feared than the good green moss of Earth. They had been wrong, of course. But by the time they got around to admitting it, it was already too late. And the people had supplied a name where the scientists had failed. They called it, simply and accurately enough, the *Creeping Death*...

The Creeping Death. Ron Patterson repeated the words to himself, and shuddered with the enormity of his guilt.

Not that he had known. No reason why he, any more than anyone else, should have suspected that the seeds of destruction had clung to those mineral specimens he had brought back from Callisto. No reason, either, why it shouldn't have been caught at Quarantine—except for the greedy impatience of a certain high official who had scorned the red tape of every department but his own.

Oh, there were lots of people to share the blame. Lots of mistakes, all duly established and officially recorded. But when you came right down to it: Ron Patterson was the man who had brought it in.

"You're the guy," his mind echoed now with every weary step. "You're it, brother!"

So why had they let him have one

of the precious oxygen masks? Why should he, of all people, be one of the chosen few? They had used the Work-Scale factors in the ruthless, but necessary, process of elimination. Still, many men of more importance had been denied.

And what did they want with him now? He had told the Court of Investigation everything he knew, and it was all a matter of record. So now what? Further recrimination? They could have simply denied him an oxygen helmet. He wished, now, that they had.

Or did he? Another instinct, stronger than despair, protected his helmet now as he slipped and caught himself carefully. And perhaps it didn't matter that he was being trailed—but still he tried to muffle the echo of his lonely steps, and still he scurried from the protection of one shadow to the next. Like an animal in a jungle.

For Capitola, once the seat of World Government and center of all civilization, *was* a jungle. A jungle of rotting steel and concrete, where a man in an oxygen mask was marked for savage death.

HERE AND THERE a campfire flickered in feeble defiance of a Law that no longer existed, here and there another shadow moved. Either there was enough to make Ron Patterson freeze in his steps—even as he asked himself why he bothered. He wondered again whether he was being pursued, and told himself that all he had heard behind him was the echo of his own fear. *They* wouldn't have waited, not the Doomed Ones. But still, ever since he had slipped out into the night from his own lair... ever since he had left behind the protection of that cave, remembered from boyhood, on the far outskirts of the city...

He whirled suddenly now. And caught a glimpse of a dim figure slipping into the deep shadow of an entranceway behind him. So they *were* after him! Stalking him, closing in for the kill.

Instinct took over completely. He began to run, blindly. Behind him pounded the steps of his pursuer, no longer furtive. And a low cry, too. A challenge, a call for reinforcements.

Reason slowed his feet again. There was no place to go, no help for *him*. He didn't know where the Council met; even so, he couldn't bring the savage pack to their door. Better to die, than betray the last remnants of authority in a lawless world and the last slim hope of a hopeless one.

But still, he ran. Even chuckled to himself, with grim futility, as he swerved suddenly into the dark mouth of a mid-block alleyway. On one side towered the empty shell of a condemned apartment house. He ran the length of the building, leaped high to catch the top of the tall fence which extended behind it.

His arms were weak, his oxygen pack a bulky hinderance, but slowly he pulled himself up. One last heave of undernourished muscles, and then he was straddling the barricade. He looked back up the alley with a triumphant grin as he dropped on over.

But triumph faded as he hit the ground on the other side. Even as he dropped, he realized there could be only one explanation why this wooden barricade should still stand in a section where steel and concrete crumbled to the touch. And now, still facing the fence, he caught the flicker of light reflected against the treated surface of the boards. He turned slowly.

FOR THE moment they were too startled to move. A dozen or more

ghosts of humanity, huddled around a fire which itself could only smoulder in this fetid atmosphere. Once they had been men and women. Brokers and clerks and technicians and housewives—perhaps they had even lived in the once-luxurious apartment at their backs.

But now they were the beasts of this jungle, clinging desperately to life and their bit of primitive warmth. The embers reflected their gaunt, yellowed faces as they stared at him blankly. And Ron Patterson could only stare back at them with mingled pity and fear.

Then the scene broke. A voice, a hoarse voice which had once belonged to a woman, snarled incredulously: "A helmet! He's got a helmet, that one!"

The man by her side stumbled to his feet with an obscene curse. Then the whole pack rose, with shrill cries and clutching fingers. The helmet would do none of them any good now—in fact they would only kill each other over it. But still it symbolized all they had lost and all whom they hated. It was the mark of "The Chosen"—that ironical term they were screaming at him like a curse.

And Ron sympathized with them, even as he fought for his own life with his back to the fence. Almost automatically he fought, punching and kicking and squirming to rid himself of the skeletal hands which tore at his head and chest.

He broke free for an instant, long enough to see how well he had trapped himself. The high barricade enclosed the small yard on all three sides, with the side of the building at the other end. He could never scale that again. Even if he found the strength, they would pull him down first and swarm over him by the sheer weight of number.

There was only one way out: through the shell of the building itself. One misstep might bring it down on his head, or send him hurtling through a rotted floor—but it was his only chance.

He fought them off again and broke away. A closed door in the wall confronted him, and one man reached him again and clung to his arm. But Ron shook him loose with a bone-crunching blow, and the door collapsed at his shove.

Then he was running through the pitch-black interior, slipping and stumbling with the mob in full cry behind him. He ran straight ahead, trusting his hunch that this was an apartment house, and that the corridor would lead straight through the building to a front entrance.

He crashed headlong into some obstruction. It gave beneath his weight, but pitched him to the floor in a stunned heap. He staggered up, shaking his dazed head, and instinctively feeling to make sure the helmet was still intact and in place. Behind him the pursuit drew closer. A flare flamed up suddenly in the dark behind him, and a cry of discovery.

Ahead still lay utter blackness, but with a square patch of lighter darkness which promised the exit he had hoped for. He reached it, and found the street.

BUT STILL they were on his heels. Closing in on him from behind, with shrill cries to bring others to the hunt. Two figures were already running diagonally across the street, heading him off, and down the block others poured from their dark holes to block him there. He was completely surrounded now—and even as he realized this, he was already fighting off the first attackers.

Left ... right ... dodge ... kick

...they were weaker than he and went down easily, but always more swarmed in like a circling pack of wolves. He fought valiantly for several minutes, and then suddenly they were too much for him, and he was going down...down...

The next few moments were dazed ones. Ron knew only that he was at the bottom of a screaming, struggling heap. Others were trying to pull away those who had downed him, a pack of wolves fighting each other now for the spoils.

The pressure gave way suddenly. The screams of revenge were suddenly shrieks of terror and pain and warning; they scrambled away from him. Until there were only three still holding him down—and they no longer clawed or struggled or even moved.

Unbelievably, Ron shoved their limp bodies aside and struggled back to his feet. His attackers were fleeing in every direction, scurrying for cover. One man still hesitated near him, turned as if to renew the attack. The next instant he crumpled where he stood, in a blinding flash of blue flame which spurted out from the gloom of the building Ron had just abandoned.

Ron waited no longer to question the miracle which had saved him. The blue arc told him all he wanted to know: that someone, somehow, was still in possession of a lethal weapon. That in itself was enough in a city where all weapons had long ago been confiscated and destroyed, in the first useless attempt to prevent civil riots. Ron thought not that he had been saved—but only had been luckier so far than those poor souls whose bodies were strewn about him in dim heaps. So he dashed for cover, too, even as desperately as had his erstwhile attackers.

Two blocks away, satisfied that he had escaped, he slowed down to take

stock. He was still alive. He still had his helmet. And somewhere the last guardians of civilization still awaited him. For that reason alone he would keep going as long as he could. There was hope implicit in the mere fact that they had summoned him.

WHO "THEY" were, and where they were, Ron still didn't know. Even more, he wondered how they had found him.

A man had brought the summons the previous night. A Doomed one, Ron had thought at first, who had suddenly appeared at the mouth of his cave like a messenger of Death. Ron had leaped to his feet, prepared to fight for his life, but the eyes of the man had stopped him. They met his without envy or hate; with calm dignity instead of insane longing for the helmet Ron wore.

His message had been direct and simple. "Patterson, you are needed by the Council. Tomorrow night you will go to the Plaza in the city, leaving here immediately after dusk. At the fountain there you will be met by a guide who will take you to the meeting place. You will know him by his helmet...and I don't have to warn you to watch your step."

A smile flickered briefly in his sunken eyes, a wasted hand raised in a gesture meaning "good luck", and then the aged messenger had vanished as suddenly as he had come.

He had been, then, not one of the Doomed Ones, nor one of the Chosen. Rather, in the primitive terms of this primitive world, one of the very few Trusted. And before, in the civilized world...well, Ron hated even to guess what great abilities and authority had probably once been vested in that still noble figure.

But there had been no questioning the summons. And now he was almost

there. Ahead lay the empty stretch of the Plaza square, there the spot where once the Fountain of Light had played its luminous symphonies.

Ron hurried forward, remembering the carefree evenings of a vanished past when this same spot had been only a lovers' rendezvous, and wondering when his guide would show himself. Suddenly he halted, and wondered no longer.

A body lay at his feet, in the very rubble which had once been the high shaft of the Fountain. The grotesque, shapeless heap told the story even in that light, and as Ron took another step forward his feet kicked the broken shards of an oxygen helmet.

He straightened up with a hopeless sigh. Thinking not of his own danger, but only that he could never find the Council now. The fact that they had risked one of their own members showed how badly they needed him.

But there wasn't the slightest chance of his finding them without a guide. Not when hordes of savage people had scoured the city looking for the leaders they thought had betrayed them. Not a chance. Not even an incentive now to keep himself alive...nothing...

Ron was so wrapped in his own discouragement that he didn't even hear the light, cautious footsteps approaching from behind. He neither cared, nor knew, that anyone was near until the quiet, cool voice impinged on his consciousness.

"Poor Ramsey," it murmured. "He was a valuable man. I wonder if you're worth it, Patterson?"

CHAPTER II

RON WHIRLED, hardly believing his own senses. A feminine voice, a lovely if bitter one, in the midst of this nightmare?

But she stood facing him, a slender outline in trim flying togs. Starlight gleamed dully on the weapon in her hand, and Ron recognized its shape as that of the government-model Lethoray. That—and something in her proud stance, some remembered quality of her voice, prodded his memory.

"Varie Merlo!"

"Ron Patterson," she echoed mockingly. "The intrepid explorer of space. I called to you back there, but you ran like a scared rabbit."

He grinned wryly. "I might have known. I might have known that if anyone had a Lethoray, it would be someone like you. Some privileged character, like the President's daughter."

She answered, more in contempt than resentment: "And weren't you lucky I did, my friend?"

"I'm not so sure," Ron answered slowly. "I'll fight for my life, sure, but—"

"You weren't doing very well."

"Maybe not. But cold-blooded slaughter, with an illegal weapon..."

She shook her head wonderingly. "You're a strange man, Patterson, with a strange sense of values. Those poor souls were dying anyway, dying slowly and painfully. And for some reason, the Council seems to think *you're* more important."

"And what about you? You seem to be wearing a mask too, as well as carrying what is probably the last gun in the city. What's *your* job, baby? Besides shadowing men you dislike, I mean."

She didn't answer. She merely turned away, slipping the gun back in its holster. "Come on."

Ron followed her, still grinning wryly to himself. Remembering those first secret interviews with the great Addison Merlo...remembering too the cold antagonism of his daughter, who

had served as his secretary. In other words, she had gotten under his skin, even then, and was still there...

"The famed and fabulous Miss Merlo," he murmured at her back. "I still can't believe my luck."

She turned her head impatiently. "The less noise we make the more chance we have of getting there. And I suggest you keep your distance, so that we can't be jumped both at once."

A very practical suggestion, delivered in practical, impersonal tones. Ron fell back fifty feet, trailing along behind her in the shadows of the buildings. They had reached Zone One now—the section where the Creeping Death had first started. It was hard to believe that less than three months ago these crumbling ruins had once housed the central government of an entire planet. But now there was nothing left, not even much to attract an occasional scavenging party, and the degree of infection here was so bad as to discourage even that.

Ron wondered how the Council itself managed to exist in this dread region. Suddenly he found himself almost on top of Varie Merlo, who halted with a warning gesture. He slipped into a wall crevice beside her, holding his breath.

A hundred yards ahead, a tattered band of ghosts filed across the rubble-choked street. A band of the Doomed, apparently still searching for the leaders they thought had deserted them. Men with only hate and desperation left to sustain them; and their silent march across these desolate ruins seemed a symbol of man's final defeat.

Ron sighed to himself, grateful at least for the human warmth of the body so close to his. Then he was aware that Varie, for all her apparent hardness, was trembling too.

Whether from fear, or fatigue, or an emotion like his—Ron didn't know. But instinctively he put his arms around her, and held her close, and so they remained until the danger had passed.

Then she pulled away abruptly, and her voice was ice hard. "Shall we go, Romeo?"

"Lead on," he answered, and was glad she couldn't see his face.

THE COUNCIL, as Ron suspected, had gone underground literally as well as figuratively.

They felt their way in blackness down the first flight of crumbling concrete stairs, and then Varie produced a tiny pocket raylight. The light aroused Ron's resentment again, and also confirmed his guess. They were in one of those old underground warrens, those ancient bomb shelters from another dark age in the history of man.

Most of them had long since been sealed off. A few, such as this, had been kept in condition for possible practical use. But even here the Creeping Death had begun its inroads. Its bright orange mycellium already threaded the walls and the baffles which were set out from them in staggered sequence.

The lower galleries became progressively cleaner as they descended, however, and finally ahead lay the air-lock, with the massive durasteel doors which sealed the inner chamber. Varie opened the outer one by pushing a concealed button, then waited to close it behind. The interior of the lock was brightly lit, and Ron was already searching for the release on the second door when Varie laughed behind him.

"First, my friend, we decontaminate ourselves. You can't open it any way."

Whereupon she calmly began to strip. Ron stared in amazement, first

at her, then at the row of garments already hanging along the hooks, then back at her.

"But...look..." he stammered.

"Look if you must," she said scornfully, "but it has to be done. Off with the clothes, Lover Boy."

Ron turned his back and grimly followed her example. If ever there was a girl who needed spanking, he thought, and if ever there was an opportunity....

But he was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of it. In fact, he heaved a sigh of relief when a garment like a long hospital gown was tossed unceremoniously over his shoulder. He put it on and turned to find Varie similarly, if more fetchingly, attired.

But his embarrassment was still not at an end. Varie picked up an ordinary old-fashioned garden spray, and sprayed him with intimate thoroughness. Ron recognized the color and the acrid fumes. It was TRX3, the scarce compound which was the only thing known even to discourage the orange blight. That same precious chemical had stained the fence he had climbed earlier in the evening—undoubtedly part of the precious government hoard which had been looted.

Satisfied with her job on him, Varie handed over the spray and indicated that he was to return the favor. Ron obliged, trying to remain completely objective about the job in spite of the lush lines under the thin, clinging garment.

Finally she nodded, and moved away. She spoke a stream of meaningless syllables into what looked like an ornamental device on the face of the inner door. Machinery whirled as she gave the verbal combination, and then the heavy door swung slowly open.

The guard on the other side lowered his Lethoray gun and nodded to Varie as they went past. A "guard"

whom Ron recognized despite the nightshirt—the Supreme Commander of the World Security force! He followed closely behind as they went on down the short passageway, and at last came into the chamber where a world would be saved—or lost.

RON'S FIRST impressions were practical ones. Lights...oxygen. Varie was already hanging her own helmet carefully beside the others strung along the rear wall. Ron followed her lead again, surprised at how few there were. Not even enough, apparently, for all of the forty men or so who stared silently at the newcomers.

Except for the guard's, there were no arms in evidence. Varie's had vanished too—except for a suspicious bulge under her robe in a spot where nature had never intended Varie to bulge! Again Ron found himself wondering at the girl's role and motives.

A low murmur followed Ron down the aisle behind Varie. "That's Patterson," he could hear them whispering. "*That's* the man we can thank for all this."

For his part, Ron recognized a few guilty faces too. Important men who had failed their jobs and now were trying desperately to make up for it. And most of all—the man who now rapped his gavel as if parliamentary procedure could save the world.

Eric Kiger. The former Chief of Exploration and Resources, who had bullied a petty Quarantine official into releasing those mineral specimens from Callisto. Who, at the hearings, had constantly played down his own mistake by pointing at Ron Patterson.

Ron hated him, naturally; but still was not surprised to find him heading the Council as Addison Merlo's successor. Kiger was rugged, hard-driving, tough-skinned. A born leader, for such times as this. Furthermore—and Ron knew this from his own ex-

perience—Kiger had an immense grasp of technical knowledge in many fields.

"Order, gentlemen! Order, please!" Kiger met Ron's stare with a glare of his own. "Mr. Patterson, you did not return with the guide we sent to meet you."

Ron rose, flushing at the suspicion in the man's voice. But Varie Merlo spoke up before he could make his own answer.

"If you please, Mr. President, I brought Patterson here on my own responsibility. I happened to see him—he was wandering around like a lost soul—and took pity on him. I knew he was needed here."

Chuckles, and an appreciative grin from Kiger. Ron glanced at Varie, wondering what motive had prompted that deliberately casual description of her night's activities. Whatever her game was, he could play it too.

"I proceeded to the rendezvous as directed," he said stiffly. "Unfortunately, your guide was dead."

Someone murmured, "Poor Ramsey," and Kiger hanged the gavel again with unsentimental impatience. "So you see, Mr. Patterson, why we must take every precaution. However, you seem to be safely here, thanks to Miss Merlo, and for your benefit I shall repeat some facts already known to the rest of us... Please do sit down, Mr. Patterson!"

Ron sat, feeling like a schoolboy.

"We all know," Kiger went on, "that no practical method of controlling the fungus has been found. In fact our laboratories themselves have all succumbed, thus preventing further experimentation.

"Our sources of power have failed, and all forms of communication. Even so, there is no good reason to hope that any other spot on this globe has escaped. Many airships touched here in the normal flow of commerce be-

fore we set up our own self-imposed quarantine. Even then, many private citizens escaped our patrols—undoubtedly to flee abroad and thus spread the infection..."

"That's common knowledge even outside," Ron interrupted. "What about the other settled planets? Mars, Venus?"

KIGER IGNORED the interruption. "Unquestionably, the orange blight has spread its tentacles far and wide over the face of our own planet. Since Capitola, with all its resources, was unable to halt the destruction, there is no hope that other cities have fared better. The fact that no earth ships have appeared, proves it.

"As for the other planets...we have all hoped, of course, that our silence in itself would be enough to attract attention. That at least our own outposts on Mars or Venus would investigate and come to our aid."

Kiger paused dramatically. "That hope, gentlemen, is gone. Two nights ago a Martian patrol ship moved within eye range. We managed to communicate by blinker—with a portable raybeam which was among the emergency equipment stored here. Their answer was as plain as it was disheartening: any ship which even attempts to leave Earth will be attacked and blown to bits."

Silence. Bitter silence—and then the Supreme Commander of a mighty force which no longer existed, screamed hysterically: "Just find me one ship—and we'll see about that!"

"You can't blame 'em, can you?" demanded Ron involuntarily. "They know what happened here; they've seen the results now. We'd do the same thing in their shoes—and let's not kid ourselves about that!"

It was only the truth, of course, but the truth can be scant comfort. Hostility glared at Ron from every side, and from his dias, Kiger grinned

down at him sardonically.

"Objectivity, my young friend, can be anything, but a virtue when you're fighting for your life. Also—you were summoned by the Council for a specific purpose, and not to give us lessons in logic."

Ron flushed, and Kiger raised his voice again. "The truth of the matter, gentlemen, is that we *do* have a ship!"

Stunned silence for a moment, and then a rising babble of excitement. Kiger held up his hand again.

"A ship, yes. But one with limitations. It is an experimental model, which happened to be undergoing tests that saved it. Mr. Stillman knew of it—and after much searching he and I finally located it. It is stored in an underground chamber like this—except it is one which was fitted out as a vacuum chamber. From the observation window, at least, it appears to be still untouched...we didn't open the chamber, of course."

Kiger grinned at his audience. "I'll admit I was tempted, even as any of you would have been. But there were several drawbacks, aside from my own sense of duty. This ship is incredibly small, which indicates its radical design. Secondly, I doubt that anyone here, with the possible exception of Mr. Patterson, is capable of flying it. It reminded me of nothing more than the ship which he flew to Callisto—and unfortunately, back again."

Ron nodded slowly. "The K-3. I heard of it—an even more advanced model of my ship."

"So," said Kiger, "now you shall have your chance to...shall we say, redeem yourself?"

Ron hesitated, his thoughts in a turmoil.

"You mean you're *afraid* to tackle it, Mr. Patterson?"

Ron flared up. "Of course not! My past record speaks for itself, in that regard. But—"

"There are no 'buts', Mr. Patterson! Not for a man in *your* position!"

Ron tried to choke back his resentment. Varie, Kiger...everybody wanted a kick at the man who was already down. He could feel the hostility of the group closing in around him from every side.

"You have a purpose, a reason for making this trip?"

"I can show you one," said Kiger furiously. "Even if it has to be a gun at your head."

"In that case..." Ron grinned thinly, "If that's the best reason you can offer...the answer is no."

CHAPTER III

FOR A moment the silence was so thick that Ron could almost hear the sound of Kiger's jaw dropping. Then the room exploded into violence. Voices rose in cries of contempt, and chairs were pushed back. The ex-Supreme Commander started down the aisle, gun drawn and outraged patriotism oozing from every pore.

Ron sat where he was, cold and withdrawn and almost indifferent. Kiger tried to regain his dignity by pounding with his gavel—but it was another voice which stopped them all in their tracks.

"Stop it, you fools! Stop it, I say!"

Varie Merlo stood on the seat of her chair, her Lethoray poised and threatening. Ron stared up at her with as much astonishment as the rest. She glanced down at him and bit her lip, with obvious uncertainty.

The Commander saw it and moved toward her. "I'll have to confiscate that weapon, Miss Merlo."

"You'll have to take it away from me first," she said flatly, and raised her voice again. "Gentlemen, this is the Council! You're behaving like... like a bunch of hysterical women! I am not defending Mr. Patterson, but

only his right to be heard." She glanced at Ron again, with that same strange look of hostile calculation. "How about it, Mr. Patterson? What reason can you possibly give for refusing this assignment?"

"I haven't refused any assignment yet," Ron answered evenly. "I only refuse to be threatened. If Mr. Kiger has a plan which makes sense, I would like to hear it."

The room quieted, and with an effort, Kiger swallowed his anger. "I am surprised that it is necessary to elaborate the obvious. We know nothing further can be accomplished here, we know now that we cannot expect outside help. Our only chance, good or bad, is to send an expedition out.

"As Patterson should know, he himself brought this curse back to Earth when he returned from the first successful trip ever made to that barren satellite of Jupiter called Callisto. At the hearings, he himself testified that similar growths exist there—although, he said, not in the virulent form which we have the misfortune to know. That suggests to me, if not to Patterson, that some natural enemy of the orange fungus keeps it in check on Callisto.

"We have a ship, which Patterson himself admits is even more advanced than the one he used on his first trip. We can therefore attempt to reach Callisto again, ferret out and bring back whatever it is that attacks the fungus. Failing that, we can at least land on Mars or even Jupiter and attempt to enlist aid. I know that I would gladly take the chance—and so would any of you—if we had the benefit of Patterson's skill and experience."

RON SHOOK his head slowly. "It doesn't ever hurt to look before you leap. In the first place, you are assuming that the original spores were imported with my mineral specimens

from Callisto..."

"It was the assumption of the official investigation," Kiger growled.

"All right. I also pointed out that I had touched Jupiter in an emergency landing on my return trip. But since it is true that the fungus has never been reported from Jupiter, I'll waive the point.

"Even so, it may not be a 'natural enemy', or parasite, which controls the growth in its home territory. It may be due simply to the difference in atmosphere, lack of oxygen alone. Our lab tests were never extensive enough to establish that point..."

"We can talk till doomsday about what *wasn't* done!" Kiger cut in again.

"All right," Ron admitted. "I agree that Callisto itself is worth a try. But as for landing on Mars or Jupiter or any other inhabited planet...no. Jupiter is unfriendly, to say the least. Only luck saved me the last time, and it would be useless suicide to approach that planet for help. Mars is—or was—friendly. But that is reason enough to stop me from carrying the contamination to them too. Our own people there and on Venus are virtual exiles; they have sacrificed enough already without bringing them our new affliction."

Ron's answer was weighed in silence. Then Kiger forced his face into another sardonic grin. "I yield to Mr. Patterson's nice little sense of ethics. However—and impressed as I am by his over-worked conscience—I do suggest that as many as possible accompany him to remind him of his assigned goal once he has escaped the fate which the rest of us must await."

Kiger's voice was at once a sneer and a challenge. In fact, he seemed almost deliberately bent on arousing conflict in an atmosphere already tense with desperation. For that reason alone, Ron ignored the slur.

"I agree," he said. "However, I

doubt that the K-3 can carry more than two or three passengers. Like the K-2, it was intended for experimental work only. Also, how do we get the ship out of its underground test chamber? Even if we had the machinery and men to disassemble it and then reassemble it above-ground, it would be hopelessly contaminated before we even started."

"I am not a complete numbskull," answered Kiger, "and neither is Mr. Stillman, who helped me locate the ship. The test chamber was apparently remodeled for its specific purpose. The overhead part rolls back—or did. However, now it has disintegrated to the point where actually the ship is protected only by the plastifilm shell which was sprayed inside the chamber to make it airtight. The ship should be well able to blast its own way out..."

Kiger paused, and glanced around at his audience. "Aside from Mr. Patterson's cold feet, there is only one question. And that, gentlemen, is the toughest of all! *Who goes with our reluctant hero?*"

Ron, already busy with his own problems, listened with only half an ear to the discussion which followed. At first, unselfishness and reason prevailed. It was ascertained by a careful check that none of the surviving members of the Council could qualify as a competent botanist or bacteriologist, or even as a chemist. Ramsey—poor Ramsey—had been the expert in that field.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS were offered, but none agreeable to all. They wouldn't admit it, even to themselves, but the august members of the Council were human too. They were also exhausted, hopeless, and desperate. The veneer began to crack under the strain. Accusations of self-interest were hurled back and forth. A fist-

fight broke out on the far side of the room.

And Eric Kiger helped not at all. "Let us be frank," he said grimly. "By reason of technical knowledge alone, I myself am probably the most logical candidate. But you all want to go. You would all risk anything to escape this hell for even a few days."

A harsh voice answered him. "You're damned right! And I'm not giving up my chance to any other skunk who tries to call himself a scientist!"

That was all Kiger needed, apparently. He was off his platform in one leap, already swinging. Others dove in, and the last vestige of order on Earth gave way. What was very likely the last meeting of the Council had turned into a free-for-all.

Ron backed away from the melee, seeking for Varie Merlo with some instinctive notion of offering protection. But that, he decided, was a laugh. Varie had already taken advantage of the situation to make a quick exit. Trust Varie.

And the fighting was not to end with fists. Men had already piled on the stout Supreme Commander, fighting for possession of his gun. Ron hesitated, knowing it was too late now to bring any of them back to their senses. Hunger and despair had finally broken the leaders even as it had the people; what had started as an argument was now a deadly grim struggle for survival.

A hand grabbed Ron's arm, and he turned to defend himself. It was Kiger, panting and torn. But he was only pointing toward the rear exit. "Come on!"

Ron still hesitated, and Kiger pulled him away. "*They* don't matter! If *you* get hurt, everything's lost!"

He grabbed up one of the oxygen masks, and thrust another at Ron. "Quick! While we still have a

chance!"

But they had already been spotted. Several men yelled as they saw Kiger running toward the exit corridor. Ron dashed after him with the mob already on his heels. As he slipped through the air-lock door, Kiger slammed it behind him.

"That'll hold 'em for a minute! Let's go!"

BLINDLY, RON followed him along the black tunnel and up the endless stairs, adjusting his helmet as he ran. Then finally they came out into the starlit wasteland of the surface, and after several corners Kiger paused to catch his wind.

"Where now?" asked Ron breathlessly.

"The ship, of course. Stillman knows where it is, too, and will probably lead the others—but we'll get there first!"

"You're going to desert them?"

"Animals! Crazy animals. They'll only kill each other anyway, and perhaps wreck the ship in the bargain. It's up to you and me, Patterson. If we don't make it, no one ever will."

Kiger set off again at a run, and Ron followed. Much as he disliked the man, he had to admit the brutal logic of his explanation. If that ship was ever to get away—and if Earth's only salvation did depend on it—there was no time to worry about anything else. Not even Varie Merlo. No single life was as important as this.

Ron could already hear their pursuers behind, but Kiger was leading the way without hesitation. Through ruined buildings, down one street and up another. Until finally they had reached the edge of the Central Air-strip, and had found the mouth of another black tunnel.

Kiger produced a raylight, and they went on down. There were only two short flights of stairs here, before the

airlock. The outside doors had already been eaten away at their pivots and hung ajar. The inner-door was still in place, but groaned as Kiger pushed it open. Then Ron caught the gleam of still another door in the beam of the light; and through the observation port in its center, the glistening skin of a spaceship's slender nose.

The glimpse itself was enough to thrill Ron. Kiger was already fumbling at the door, but he straightened up with a sharp exclamation. "Somebody's already been here!"

Together they burst into the test chamber, and now it was Ron who led the way. His first glimpse had satisfied him that externally, at least, the K-3 was not too different from her predecessor. His hand found a familiar release in the side hatch, his foot a familiar step, and then he was in. The cabin was empty.

Ron bent over the controls as Kiger pulled the hatch closed, his fingers seeking the familiar switches. One clicked, and the cabin burst into light. Kiger breathed triumphantly over his shoulder: "Told you she was still okay!"

"Sure," muttered Ron dryly, "the lights even work. Now if this baby's hot—and I don't burn out the whole works—we're okay."

More switches, then an unfamiliar toggle tentatively, and a familiar throb gladdened his ears. Ron trimmed them all back with a delicate, sure touch. The strange board was suddenly as easy to him now as that of a flitter-jet to any airpark attendant. He was home, he had a ship under him again, and he was happy...

"At least," he muttered, as he blew the tubes once again in quick succession, "I'll die happy. How about you, Kiger?"

Kiger's teeth gleamed in the greenish reflected light of the dials. "We'll decide that later. Right now I'm in-

terested in getting away from here, before that damned fungus eats this ship right out from underneath us. And before our friends catch up with us. They *do* have a Lethoray, you know."

Ron had already taken the words out of Kiger's mouth. He hadn't been listening anyway; his ears had been testing the muted whine of the tubes. And now he cut them all in, with a yell of warning. "Here we go! Hold tight!"

The last, of course, was only the spaceman's standard gag for such occasions. Gravity held them in an iron grip as the tubes blasted wide open; the force of acceleration slammed them deep into the cushions of their padded seats and squeezed them as in a vise. They didn't even feel the slight jolt as the ship burst through the fungus-rotted overhead. They didn't feel anything but that excruciating pressure until the long minutes had passed and the weight of 5 G's had eased.

Ron pulled out of it first. He trimmed his controls again, sighed with satisfaction, and then glanced at his still-gasping companion.

"Well... Callisto, here we come! I only hope we'll be able to do something for those poor wretches we're leaving behind."

Kiger was shaking his head. "Not Callisto, my friend."

"What d'you mean?"

"Jupiter," Kiger said—and there was a gun in his hand to back it up.

CHAPTER IV

IT WASN'T much of a weapon at first glance, in fact it looked like a toy in Kiger's hand. But its reputation was known throughout space. The famous little air-gun from Jupiter: it shot a tiny, invisible jet of "hard air" which killed at close range just as

surely as the blast from any ordinary gun.

Kiger nodded his head, but the gun remained steady. "Get to work on those controls, Patterson. Set your course for Jupiter."

Ron hesitated a second longer, still measuring his chances with a careful eye. Finally he shrugged and leaned forward and manipulated the course-computer dial. He was grinning as he leaned back and looked around at Kiger again.

"Okay, tough guy. Around and around it goes. Let's see what you can do now with that pop-gun of yours."

Even as Ron spoke, the throbbing of the generators faded and the tubes died out with a soft whine.

"Blast you! I'll—"

"No you won't," said Ron. "Not unless you want to spend the rest of your life in this cabin. We're in the orbital grove already, and here we stay."

Kiger's face set, his hand tightened around the gun.

"It's okay by me," Ron said quietly. "Go right ahead, if you want to spend the rest of your days circling around Earth. When it gets too boring you can always blow yourself up. It's going to take a better hand than yours to pull this baby out of it without burning her up, I can promise you that."

Sweat glistened on Kiger's heavy face. "Patterson, you're either a rock-headed fool or a traitor, and I still don't know which."

"I told you I'd listen to reason, but guns don't impress me. Particularly a gun like that. Maybe you should begin by explaining that much of it."

Kiger shrugged. "It was in the government collection. One of the few we saved when we destroyed the armory to keep them out of the hands of the mob."

"A Jupiter air-gun, and now you

want to head for Jupiter. Just a coincidence...or is it?"

"That's all," Kiger answered wearily. "I don't have to explain the second part to you."

"You might try—unless you just want to wait until the oxygen gives out."

KIGER ANSWERED grimly, watching Ron's face. "You know as well as I do that the Creeping Death isn't any accident of nature. It's a synthetic culture—deliberately planted on Earth for a deliberate purpose."

Ron stared at the man incredulously. "You mean...it's a weapon? In other words...*biological warfare*?"

"An attempt to destroy Earth completely, or at least render it helpless against an eventual invasion. We can blame our old friends on Jupiter... and also the traitor who smuggled it in."

Kiger added the last with accusing emphasis, and it all came suddenly clear to Ron. He understood now the mysterious official secrecy which had surrounded the whole problem. And he understood the hostility which had greeted him from every side. They all suspected *him*—at least, all those who knew the truth about the "fungus". He remembered now how during the investigation the Court had harped on the details of his emergency landing on Jupiter.

"So you really think," he asked slowly, "that that's where we'll find our answer?"

"What do *you* think?"

Despite the unfair implication, Ron could only nod. Jupiter was the scourge of the System, a heritage from the dark days following the Atomic wars. An Inquisition had followed the holocaust. All scientists, all technicians, engineers, and anyone who had had any conceivable part in the wars

—all had been branded indiscriminately as war criminals and banished to the then-outermost planet.

But Jupiter, for all its molten lava beds and steaming glaciers, had proved not so much a prison as an arsenal. The exiles had found it rich in uranium; they and their descendants had built an outlaw civilization which had outstripped Earth in scientific development while remaining barbaric in culture. For the only cultural heritage of the Jupes had been war; their only ambition, revenge; and the Creeping Death could easily be their first step toward their goal of conquest.

So Ron nodded, but protested Kiger's implication that he had been the tool of the Jupes. "It was only luck I got away with my own life, when I landed there."

Kiger's smile was sarcastic.

"All right. *You* were the man who by-passed Quarantine with those contaminated minerals. Otherwise, it would have been caught and checked in time."

"And your ship was thoroughly checked when you first got back," Kiger countered. "Our mechanics could find no evidence of the troubles which you claimed forced you to make an emergency landing on Jupiter."

ONCE AGAIN Ron was at loss for an answer. It was true—there had been something strange about the whole affair. The mysterious trouble which had forced him down in the first place, his lucky escape from the Jupes, only to find that his ship once again functioned perfectly, and the final inspection which had failed to reveal anything wrong...

"Well," Kiger was saying with another shrug. "There's one good way to prove your innocence. We're not going to prove anything this way."

"There's still a couple of questions

that bother me. First of all, Kiger, that fight which broke up the Council meeting didn't just happen."

"What d'you mean, it didn't happen?"

"I mean you deliberately encouraged it."

"Maybe I did," Kiger admitted blandly. "It would have ended up that way, anyway. If *anyone* was to escape, it had to come quick, and while the rest were momentarily distracted. I just took advantage of the inevitable, that's all. Otherwise, *no one* would have escaped. What's your other question?"

"Just this," Ron answered, leaning over and reaching casually for the gun in Kiger's lap. "If it came from the government collection, chances are it's not—"

Ron was wrong. Kiger had pulled back suddenly as he realized what Ron was up to, and his finger had jerked the trigger apparently involuntarily. There was a sharp little *zzt!* but it missed Ron and by that time his hand had closed over Kiger's wrist.

Ron had the advantage, being already on his feet, but Kiger was strong and fast. He twisted sideways in his seat, bringing one foot up in a kick that sent Ron crashing against the control board. Ron dove back in as Kiger got to his feet, raising the gun.

Again that sharp little spit of sound, but once again Ron's hand had closed around Kiger's wrist and the shot went astray. Ron hung on desperately as the big man struggled to pull his arm free, driving him backward across the narrow width of the small cabin.

Kiger crashed against the bulkhead, losing his balance for an instant that was all Ron needed. A sudden twist and heave—the tiny gun fell to the deck while Kiger yelped with agony.

Neither of them had noticed the door opening from the rear compart-

ment, neither of them had heard the first sharp command. But they both heard it now—Kiger as he held his arm in pain, Ron as he bent to retrieve the fallen weapon.

"All right, boys. Leave that gun alone!"

Ron straightened around slowly, with a last longing glance at the weapon lying at his feet. But he had recognized the voice, and he could guess the authority that went with it. He looked at Varie Merlo, and at the Lethoray in her hand, with a rueful grin.

"Everybody in this league seems to have a gun but me."

Behind him Kiger cursed and made a sudden move, but Varie's gun moved even faster.

"You, too, Mr. Kiger. Get back there!"

SHE EDGED carefully forward, still keeping them covered as she reached down and groped for the little Jupe gun with her left hand. Her face was white and grim. She still wore the loose gown which she had put on in the Council chamber, but it was ripped along one side and deep red scratches showed against the cream of her exposed skin. Ron could only imagine what torture the take-off must have brought to her, hiding there in the bare cargo compartment without a padded seat to cushion the shock.

And Kiger, for all the pain of his own twisted arm, was thinking the same thing. "Great space, Varie! It's a wonder you weren't killed!"

She straightened up, holding both guns now. "I blacked-out, fortunately. Until just a few minutes ago. Then I find you two scrapping like children, instead of worrying about your mission! What's the matter with you?"

Kiger quickly took the opportunity to repeat the argument which had led to the fight. He was still rubbing his elbow resentfully, but his smooth air

of self-assurance was back. Obviously he took for granted that Varie was on his side; just as obviously he suspected Ron's motives more than ever.

Ron remained silent, knowing his protest would do no good. As Kiger talked he tried to figure out where Varie Merlo stood in this whole screwy setup. She had ducked out of the Council meeting at the first sign of trouble—either knowing or guessing what it would lead to. Also, she had obviously known the location of the ship, which was supposed to have been a secret to all but Kiger and one other man.

Were Varie and Kiger working together then? Still, Kiger had been just as startled as he himself when their other passenger had made her sudden appearance. Also, Varie had taken a dangerous chance in concealing herself during the take-off—a risk which would have been unnecessary unless she were playing some inexplicable game of her own. Perhaps *she* was in league with the Jupes?

Studying her white, determined face now, Ron found that unthinkable. Her own father—the great Addison Merlo whom Ron had worshipped as a hero ever since boyhood—had been a voluntary victim of the Creeping Death. Addison Merlo had refused an oxygen mask, both to set an example and because, he had said, his own usefulness had ended. He had gone out, then, to perish among his own unfortunate people. Could the daughter of this noble soul be a traitor?

She turned to him now, as if aware of his baffled scrutiny. "What's your side of it, Patterson?"

Ron shrugged. "Kiger's suspicious of me. I'm suspicious of him... everybody's suspicious of everybody. So here we sit, coasting along on a nice orbit that will get us nowhere."

Varie frowned, glanced at the control panel.

"I wouldn't, Miss Merlo! This baby's velocity is somewhere up there close to the speed of light—and like I told Kiger, it's going to take more than an amateur to bring her out of it."

SHE BIT her lip, shaking her head in perplexity. "I don't understand you. Mr. Kiger's told you what some of the rest of us have already suspected: that the fungus represents a deadly attack on us by Jupiter. And yet you still refuse to do what you can to help?"

"You agree with Kiger then?" Ron asked. "You think we should take on Jupiter all by ourselves, just to make sure?"

"What else is there?" Varie flared back at him. "Maybe we haven't got a chance in a million—but it's still one that anybody else would take. Anybody with any loyalty to Earth, that is!"

Behind her Kiger grinned smugly. Ron asked slowly, "And that's your *only* reason for wanting to tackle Jupiter?"

The girl answered furiously, "That's reason enough, for anybody with an ounce of courage in his veins!"

"Miss Merlo had another reason, too," Kiger interposed softly. "A personal reason, you might say. You see, her father was one of the first to suspect the true origin of the orange blight. Or perhaps he knew from the beginning..."

"My father sacrificed himself for the world," Varie interrupted indignantly.

"Maybe he did, my dear. But *not* the way the public was led to believe. You see, Patterson, when Addison Merlo resigned, there still remained one space cruiser, hidden and sealed, whose existence was known only to a few top officials. And when the ex-President disappeared—so did that

ship and some picked men who had been saved for an emergency crew."

Kiger paused and then finished with a shrug. "You can draw your own conclusions, but at any rate I agree with our charming stowaway. Jupiter's the place to find our answers."

Ron glanced at Varie Merlo, his thoughts awlirl again. The look on her face was enough to confirm Kiger's startling story. She was staring at the big man, looking surprised and worried and crafty all at once.

Then Addison Merlo *had* sold out to the enemy, or at least had deserted, instead of making the noble gesture of self-sacrifice which had been used to explain his disappearance? If so, why had he left his own daughter behind—and what was she up to now?

It was too much for Ron Patterson, but he could agree with both of his passengers in at least one thing. Jupiter held the answer, if there *was* an answer. And if any of them lived long enough to find it...

Varie still hadn't answered Kiger's accusations about her father. But she did have still another reason which both of the men had apparently forgotten: "I may not be enough of a navigator to handle this ship, but I do know one thing. On our present course we're a sitting duck for any Martian patrol ship that happens to spot us—and you both know what that will mean!"

Ron gave in with a shrug. He moved quickly back to the pilot seat and began making the first delicate adjustments which would gradually cut in the tubes again. In any ship, the use of power to change over from free flight to another course was ticklish at best. At this speed, and in this small ship, it was toying with suicide. The slightest miscalculation would be enough to start a spin, and a spin at this speed would blow the ship apart as surely as any explosion.

RON WAS concentrating so intently on his nerve-wracking task that he didn't see the shadow edging into view on the visor plate above. He didn't hear Kiger's unruffled voice saying quietly, "Well, Varie, it was a good thought, but too late." Nor did he hear Varie's gasp as she ran to the observation port and peered out into the ebony night...

All Ron knew was the sudden jolt, the reaction in his controls and the slight lurch as if they had brushed something. Instinctively he cut the tubes, incredulously his eyes leapt to the visor screen.

Then he knew. The jolt had come from powerful magnetic grapples, and they had been picked off in mid-flight as easily as any fly by a swallow!

Ron's immediate reaction was to reach for the tube controls again. But a deeper instinct stayed his hand. It would only mean even quicker death to attempt to break loose, and their attacker was obviously a ship large enough and powerful enough to withstand such a tactic.

The same caution prompted him now to knock down the Lethoray in Varie's hand as he shoved in beside her at the observation port. "Don't be a chump, girl! You'll only blow a hole in our own side!"

He looked out, shielding his eyes. The enormous hulk of the attacking ship loomed alongside and above, like some giant space liner convoying a tiny lifeboat.

"Martian patrol," muttered Eric Kiger, peering over his shoulder.

Ron nodded a bit uncertainly. True, from what he could see—identification lights, the grim color of the hull, the general lines—it looked like one of the Mars patrol cruisers. Yet, it was surprising that it had been able to overtake the K-3 so easily. It was also surprising that they had not merely

shot the K-3 down as they had warned, instead of risking contamination in this manner.

Even as he wondered, Ron could feel the slight bumps as the little K-3 was jockeyed into position so that its side port lined up with the airseal hatch in the side of the larger ship. There were faint thuds as the seal-plate was dogged down tight, and then the scratching sound as a vibroamplifier was adjusted against the outside face of their cabin door.

"Open up in there! Open up, or we'll blast you open!"

The voice convinced Ron. But Varie Merlo raised her Lethoray again, pointing it at the port.

"Hold it!" Ron yelled, jumping to grab the gun from her hand. "They're Martians! Didn't you get that accent?"

Varie struggled with him, screaming a warning, but it was too late. Already Eric Kiger, apparently convinced by the high thin voice which had hailed them, had pulled down on the master release of the port opening. The door swung out, and the next second their captors swarmed in over them.

Ron, still struggling to grab Varie's weapon, had one glimpse of the creature who chopped down at him with the butt end of a giant-sized blaster. He wore a Martian uniform, sure. But no uniform could ever hide the greenish, brute features nor the matted hair pelt of a Jupe.

CHAPTER V

IT WAS an effort to get his eyes open, and torture to face the light which beat down on him from above. Ron found himself staring up at the smooth, glaring metal ceiling of a small cabin. That, and the foul atmosphere, was enough to tell Ron that he was aboard the Jupe ship.

He groaned and pushed himself up on his elbows. Varie Merlo sat against the bulkhead directly behind him; knees drawn up and eyes blank. "Nice going, Patterson."

"We're alive aren't we? If you'd used that gun we wouldn't be."

"And that would have been bad?" she demanded bitterly. "Worse than this?"

"While there's life there's hope." He grinned, but already his own eyes were tracing hopelessly the gleaming, unbroken metal lining of their cell. The compartment was completely bare, only a fine crack outlined the one door set flush in the wall.

He glanced up at that glaring ceiling again. The white metal itself shed the harsh light which illuminated the room; obviously some luminous substance had been fused with the alloy itself.

"Radioactive," Varie took the unpleasant thought from his head. "Thanks just the same, but I still would have preferred a nice quick shot from a blaster."

Ron nodded slowly. He had heard of the "built-in light" which the Jupes used for illumination, radiations which meant slow death to any Earthman forced to long exposure. The Jupes themselves, through necessity, had developed a racial tolerance of radioactives far beyond that of the other races.

"What happened to Kiger?"

Varie shrugged. "They came and got him a little while ago. You've been out for nearly half an hour."

Ron rubbed his throbbing skull and tried to think. He could feel the pulse of the drive through the deck plates; obviously they were underway. But to where... and how long would it take? And what were they being saved for?

Varie had risen and was pacing the confines of their narrow prison. Her flimsy garment had suffered further

damage in the struggle, but she was as far beyond false modesty as she was from feminine hysteria. Ron looked at her with reluctant admiration, just as she turned and fixed him with that same frown of deliberation.

"Patterson, I've been thinking. I may have been wrong about you, and—"

Much as Ron wanted to hear what she had to say, he cut her off with a sharp hiss of warning. His ears had caught the grate of a bolt being pulled back on the door. As it swung inward, he stretched out on the floor again, feigning unconsciousness.

He felt the rush of air as the door was opened, he heard the thud of something—or someone—dropping to the deck near him. He gathered himself for action, and then heard Varie's voice, casual but with a note of warning underneath:

"Come out of it, Patterson! I think our friends want a word with you."

He opened his eyes and then climbed hastily to his feet. A bearded Jupe stood over him, blaster already raised for a brutal jab. Another stood in the doorway, also armed and ready for trouble. Kiger lay at his feet on the deck, unconscious and apparently drugged.

As the Jupe prodded him out, Ron threw one last glance over his shoulder. He realized now that Varie had saved him from a foolish move, as well as a brutal beating, and his eyes tried to reassure her.

"Good luck," she murmured softly.

HIS SILENT guards led him through the bowels of the huge ship to the bridge, and Ron quickly realized how futile any show of resistance would be. The ship fairly bristled with crew members, all armed and all going about their duties with that sullen, mechanical apathy which seemed characteristic. Their language

was English, but so archaic as to seem almost foreign.

The Captain was a superior version of the same pattern. He, too, was huge and squat, and his resplendent uniform failed to hide the thick coat of coarse black hair. But a gleam of intelligence, a nasty sort of humor, showed in his pale amber eyes. He obviously prided himself as a gentleman and a scholar, and he spoke the modern dialect.

He waved the guards aside and indicated a bench. "Sit down, my friend. No reason why you shouldn't be comfortable, at least for the moment."

Ron sat, but his eyes strayed irresistibly to the visor screen at the forward end of the bridge. It was in the form of a globe, and Ron saw that they were in space as soon as he had oriented himself to the four-dimensional projection. Behind this, the leading ship, stretched a line of similar ships in perfect formation.

The Juve Captain had followed his glance. "Mission accomplished, as you Earthmen say. We're on our way home." He smiled smugly.

"What do you want with me?"

The Captain's eyes narrowed at the contempt in his prisoner's voice. "Let's say I just want to gloat a bit. Also to thank you. I understand, from the information I extracted from your fellow prisoner, that you're the chap who planted the seeds for us, so to speak."

This, to Ron, was the final bitterness. Being thanked by the enemy himself! If it were to mean special consideration he didn't want it; but any information he could provoke might still prove useful.

"Perhaps my 'planting' days aren't over," he told the Juve leader sardonically. "Your ship has already been contaminated by mere contact with us."

"Ah!" the Captain waved a contemptuous hand. "You still don't understand, you Earthmen with all your

supposed superiority?"

He hesitated and then went on, apparently unable to resist the opportunity to boast. "The orange fungus, my stupid friend, was a little surprise created in our own laboratories. Perfectly harmless—until stimulated by a certain radio-pulse of a frequency which your monitors couldn't even detect. Then, as you have learned so well, the culture propagates itself beyond all control."

He smiled again. "Creating that synthetic culture was easy to us. Transplanting it without detection was another matter, since we know your security screen is sensitive to the approach of even a scout ship from Jupiter. And that's where you were so helpful, my friend, you and your expedition to Callisto! We deliberately jammed your controls, forced you to a landing on Jupiter, and then let you 'escape' with the seeds that did the damage.

"The rest was easy. Our ships patrolled just out of detection range, each of them equipped with the special transmitter which stimulates the fungus culture. By the time you woke up to the danger of that pretty little orange plant, it was too late. And now, with Earth helpless, the other planets will be easy."

RON NODDED slowly. "You've destroyed the center of all civilization—and what good will it do you?"

The Captain shrugged. "In time, of course, we will take over. In perhaps a year by your time—when the blight has completely spent itself."

"War has never accomplished anything," answered Ron. "We learned that on Earth two centuries ago."

"Two centuries ago," said the Captain bitterly, "a certain ancestor of my own enjoyed all the benefits of that civilization which you hold so

high. He contributed to it. He was a scientist, a great scientist—and for that crime alone he and his family were banished to what was then known as the farthest hell-spot of space!”

Ron shook his head again, confused by the conflict in his own mind. He could even sympathize with this bitter exile-race, and that was the trouble. As Kiger had pointed out, objectivity is of dubious value when you're fighting for life itself. Ron wondered to himself whether that, in the last analysis, wasn't why Earth itself had fallen. With two centuries of peace had also come the emotional complacency which had made them so vulnerable. But *had* it been peace?

So Ron pondered as the Captain glared at him triumphantly, and then aloud he thought his way through the problem. "Captain, Jupiter has always been a blot on the conscience of every thinking man on Earth. Our trouble was that we didn't face our own guilt squarely; we tried to solve a wrong by forgetting it. Now our own injustice has come home to roost."

The Captain grinned vindictively.

"But you and your people are wrong, too. We can't blame you for being bitter; but we can blame you for pursuing the same course of destruction which can lead only to further warfare and suffering. If Jupiter had ever been willing to lay aside her arms and submit to the Interplanetary Council, instead of blindly following a leader like Ivar—"

"Ivar the Great," intoned the Captain, making the automatic gesture of obsequiousness which had become a ritual on Jupiter.

"Ivar the great fraud!" retorted Ron involuntarily. "A cheap, crooked dictator—a relic of the dark ages of two centuries ago! You will never—"

The Captain lunged at him, the greenish cast of his skin almost purple with wrath. A huge paw smashed

across Ron's face before he could get to his feet, and he went over backward. He scrambled to his feet again, ready to fight it out now on even terms, but already two of the guards had seized his arms, and others had leveled their sidearms.

It was as if Ron had uttered a blasphemy and every man within hearing had been instantly galvanized into a reflex action. As he was held, helpless, the Captain smashed his open hand again across Ron's face.

Dazed and stunned, Ron heard the command, saw the gleam of the hypodermic in the hand of one of the guards. And he heard the Jupe Captain's voice, still shaking with rage:

"This one we'll save for the Leader himself."

Then, although he struggled against it, the sharp bite of the needle...and quick oblivion.

THERE WAS no dazzling light beating down on him when he awoke this time. There was only chill darkness, and the acrid stench of ammonia clutching like fingers at his raw throat. Ron sat up, choking, and a sympathetic voice muttered from the darkness near him: "You'll get used to it, chum. Breathe shallowly, and don't try to fight it."

Ron looked around, his eyes blinking and adjusting to the gloom. There were other dim forms beyond the Earthman who had spoken to him; at least fifty of them, all sitting as he was like silent statues of despair. Far beyond a corridor gleamed with luminous overhead light, and against the light were the vertical lines of the thick bars which formed their prison.

For it *was* a prison, Ron realized quickly. A prison dungeon on Jupiter, to judge from the ammonia-tainted atmosphere, and even as he thought

this, his nearest neighbor spoke again:

"Welcome to the slave pens of Jupiter, friend. What good fortune landed you here?"

Ron answered simply, matching the irony in the other's voice, that he had been picked up by one of the Jupe patrol ships and was not here by choice. The other man seemed anxious for conversation, unlike the rest of the glum lot, and Ron quickly learned all that he knew.

His name was Deglen, he had been a radionics technician, second class, and he had been captured, like most of the men in this particular pen, by a Jupe patrol ship which had landed in New Chicago.

"We didn't have anything to fight with," Deglen explained apologetically. "New Chicago had already been practically wiped up by some sort of a damned fungus, and—"

"I know," Ron interrupted dryly. "I came from Capitola, where it all started. The Jupes apparently have destroyed every city on earth—but what I don't understand is what they want with us here."

Deglen didn't know, and apparently none of the nearby prisoners either knew or cared beyond the fact that it couldn't be for anything pleasant. Ron, still weak but restless, got up and picked his way among the squatting men with Deglen following. He found that still another pen, with another group of Earth prisoners, bordered on theirs—and like all prisons, this one had a grapevine.

Some of the first arrivals had already learned the answer, to their sorrow. They had already been put to work, making repairs and cleaning out generating plants which had grown too hot even for the Jupes themselves! The Jupe civilization, as Ron already knew, was based on the

crude and dangerous atomics of uranium fission. It was practically automatic, of course—but still there came the inevitable failures and breakdowns which could be remedied only by human hands. By the human hands of slaves who could be ruthlessly sacrificed!

"But that only means a slow and horrible death!" Ron protested. "Why haven't you refused, resisted—at least, sabotaged at every opportunity? Death from a blaster would be better than that."

"You'll see," came the hopeless whisper from the next cell. "Your chance will come, and then you'll understand."

The man moved away from the bars on the other side, and behind him his new friend Deglen nudged him sharply, and then Ron turned to find that two Jupe guards were at the gate of his cell.

"Patterson!" came the guttural command. "Show yourself, you who are called Patterson."

Ron hesitated, but one of the guards had already raised his wide-mouth blaster. "Patterson! We give you five, or we fire."

Deglen sucked in an unsteady breath, whispered anxiously. "Answer, chum! If you don't, it's curtains for all of us. They've already cleaned out one block, just because somebody blew his top and cursed a guard."

"One... Two... Three..."

Ron straightened his shoulders and made his way quickly to the gate.

CHAPTER VI

JUPITER—the city itself—nestled deep in a pock mark on the face of a scarred planet. Here once the irresistible surge of a glacier had once met the boiling inferno of a

volcano; and here in the crater left by that titanic explosion the Jupes had built their only city.

Ron had heard the rumors on Earth, the legends passed down by the armchair explorers, but the cruel fantastic beauty which spread before his eyes now was beyond any Earthman's imagination.

His escorts had led him up from the dungeon deeps along endless spiralling passageways, until now they were passing through the streets of the city itself. Streets which in themselves still spiralled upward, as Ron's eyes and lungs and lagging steps told him. The entire city was laid out vertically, level after level, up and around the walls of the inverted cone which held it.

And at the very top, arching from rim to rim of the towering crater walls, was a translucent roof! Or rather, Ron decided as he craned his neck upward and studied its shimmering substance, a visible force-field. Some sort of an almost tangible transmitted barrier, obviously designed for protection against the sudden ammonia storms and the frigid temperatures of the Jupiter night.

Ron remembered only too vividly his one previous night on Jupiter. Only the heat from his idling blast tubes had been sufficient to save him. And now he could see too the advantages of this site for the Jupiter stronghold. Undoubtedly a lava bed still bubbled far underground, and these steep cliffs held in its heat. Also there was only that one opening, the very top of the crater itself, to cover for complete protection.

Ron's weary body was growing weaker, and the guard behind prodded him impatiently. But still they climbed. Terrace after ascending terrace the city clung to the encircling cliffs. Ron wished that the engineering genius which had laid it out had

also provided lifts, and then they came into a level where there were vertical elevator shafts at regular intervals. The air was cleaner here, away from the ammonia fumes which had settled to the bottom of the valley, and the buildings more elegant. He got some idea of the prevailing caste system from that and from the different appearance of the citizens they passed. He also guessed where his guides might be taking him.

Finally there remained but one level higher—and this was a white gleaming structure cantilevered far out into the void overhead. A guard challenged them as they entered a shaft hewn out of the cliff-rock itself. Then they were whisked upward, to pass by more guards. And then finally, out across a terrace which jutted out into space. Ron caught one breathtaking glimpse of the city spread out far below in a closed spiral. Then the guard shoved him roughly in through an opening of the transparent walls of the building itself, and Ron knew they had arrived at last.

THEY WERE in the aerie of the king eagle himself—the roost from which Ivar the Great surveyed his kingdom as from the top of an inverted ant's nest!

Ron's head swam at first with the sheer barbaric magnificence of it all. An enormous hall, walled on three sides only by angled panes of crystal-clear glastic. Reflecting surfaces on the ceiling above reflected the city below, showing the whole dizzy panorama of which he had just caught a glimpse.

His own guards had stopped at the sacred threshold, but now the court guards had taken him in hand and were shoving him toward the throne raised high against the inner wall. He stumbled, and then a sudden blow

from behind sent him sprawling on the thick carpeting. He tried to get up again, only to be knocked down again by another vicious blow.

"Bow, Earth-worm! Bow to the Leader!"

"Ivar, our Leader! Ivar the Great!" came the automatic chorus from the assembled throng.

Ron raised his head cautiously this time. From his throne above, the Dictator of Jupiter leered down at him. He was black-bearded and tremendous in frame, easily the size of two ordinary humans. His powerful body was clothed in tight-fitting, shiny black; with a thin braid of metallic gold spiralling around it in symbolic representation of the city he ruled.

The Jupes flanking his throne were likewise uniformed in black, but with only a tiny gold spiral on each chest. Obviously they were the nobles of his court; the syncophants which waited on every word of the great Ivar. And there were women present too—young women of smooth skin who could have only been captured slaves, judging from the heavy-boned and hairy Jupe females Ron had sighted on the streets.

Each of them was dressed only in the sheerest of filmy tunics, but their trance-like attitude gave them an unreal quality, like marble statues.

"Well," demanded Ivar with a harsh chuckle. "Have you filled your eyes, Earthman? And are you still so contemptuous of the outcasts who laid you low?"

Ron grinned. A slow, mocking grin that he couldn't resist. "Corny," he said. "You're at least six centuries behind the times, old man."

For a moment there was a stunned, incredulous silence. Then some black-garbed flunkey barked a command, and one of the guards sprang forward with a raised gun.

"Hold!" roared Ivar's voice above the uproar, and the scene froze again. Then he gestured with one hand, "Bring out the others!"

Ron stared as they were led in from a door to one side. Eric Kiger and Varie Merlo! Varie was dressed now in one of those rainbow-thin gowns, every line of her beautiful body on public display, but she seemed completely indifferent.

Ivar's eyes gleamed as they fell on her, and his black-bearded visage parted in a smile. "Well, another jewel for our crown! Come here, my pretty!"

OBEDIENTLY Varie climbed the steps of the dias, sat down on the indicated seat next to the throne. She looked straight ahead, ignoring Ron's stricken eyes, not even flinching at the rough hand which stroked her slender arm carelessly.

"And what about this one?" Ivar's nod indicated Kiger, who stood trembling in his guard's grasp.

The guard shoved, and Kiger stumbled forward desperately trying to hold himself with dignity. "I am Eric Kiger, your Majesty. Leader of the Earth Council. I was on my way to negotiate a peace when your cruiser picked us up."

"Negotiate!" Ivar slapped his knee with a roar of scorn. "Negotiate, you say!"

"I am Eric Kiger," repeated the other desperately. "*Eric Kiger*. Surely that name means something to you, your Majesty!"

"If it does, I've forgotten it," the Jupe Leader said, roaring again at his own wit. "All right, away with him."

"But—"

"Ah, you feel you deserve special treatment—is that it?"

Kiger nodded eagerly, any trace of his former courage dissolved with

fear. "Yes, your Majesty. You know full well what part I played—"

"Silence!" roared Ivar and chuckled again. "All right, Eric Kiger, you shall have special consideration. You shall receive your reward from the prettiest hand I've seen in many a year." He turned to Varie Merlo by his side, handed her something which his huge, hairy palm hid from view. "Give it to your friend, my dear! Right between the eyes!"

Frozen with unbelief, Ron watched. Varie slowly raised the hand which now held a tiny jewelled air-gun, deliberately took aim and just as deliberately pulled the trigger. Kiger fell, his own death rattle choking off his cry of protest.

Ron was already hurling himself forward, but once again a blow from the guard behind sent him sprawling. Again a blaster was raised, ready for the command, but again Ivar raised his hand.

"This one has too much spunk. It would be a shame to waste it—and end it so easily. He should make an excellent slave—as long as he lasts."

A gesture of dismissal, and Ron felt rough hands seizing him again. He caught sight of Varie once more, handing the Jupe leader back his gun with an obedient smile, and once again his anger moved him to struggle.

A great grinning guard chopped down with his pistol-butt. Ron remembered only vaguely being dragged back and tossed into the cell again—and then his exhaustion took him off into sleep.

HE AWOKE with a spinning head and the feeling that his mind must have suffered from the beatings he had taken. He remembered it as a nightmare...the span-flung city of Jupiter, the overlooking castle of the Leader with its strange mixture of

barbaric, medieval splendor and gleaming crystal walls. And Eric Kiger, who for some strange reason had seemed to expect mercy from the Jupe dictator...and then, Varie Merlo.

Most of all, Varie Merlo! It must have been a nightmare. Her docile acquiescence of the black-garbed Ivar's attentions, her cold-blooded murder of a fellow Earthman, her blank stranger's eyes who had looked right through him and beyond him...

Then a young Earthman whose name he knew somehow as Deglen was bending over him, and Ron came fully conscious and knew it had been no nightmare but bitter reality. Varie Merlo had sold herself and her friends out to the Jupes...there could be no other explanation.

"You all right, fellow?" Deglen was asking him.

"Fine," he answered, sitting up and burying his throbbing head in his hands. "Just fine, except for a skull that feels like it's coming off. I'd die happy if I could just get one of those black-haired sadists alone for a few minutes!"

"While there's life there's hope," Deglen said optimistically—and Ron grinned sourly to himself as he heard the echo of the words he himself had once spoken to an ice-blooded, double-crossing female named Varie Merlo.

The day—or was it the Jupiter night now?—wore on. A bucket of dry, tasteless concentrate rations was shoved through the gate by a Jupe guard. Ron gulped some down, as did his fellow-prisoners, only to keep his strength up. And washed the taste from his mouth with the hose which dripped continuously in one corner of the cell to supply their only source of water as well as their only means of sanitation.

There were never more than two Jupe guards in evidence, and once again Ron turned his thoughts to possible escape. The other prisoners seemed completely hopeless and dispirited, with the exception of Deglen, but still—given a leader and a plan...

Then Ron remembered the whispered words from the next cell: "You'll see...you'll understand..."—and he knew that the Jupes must have some devilish method of controlling their slave-labor groups. And within a very short time he had a chance to see that method in operation.

Three Jupe guards marched into the cell block, two of them armed with wide-range blasters and the third carrying a tray which seemed to be loaded with small glastic cylinders. They stopped at the adjoining pen, one armed guard and the man with the tray taking their position at the gate and the third continuing on around the outside to sweep the cell with his blaster from the rear side.

THERE WERE groans and mumbings from the prisoners inside, but at a threatening wave of the blaster they stumhled to their feet. The gate was chained open just wide enough so that one prisoner could exit at a time, preventing any concerted attempt to rush it, and they were gradually forced through it. As each prisoner passed through, his arm was jabbed with one of the glastic cylinders, while the second armed guard covered him with his blaster.

Staring from his side of the bars, Ron realized that the cylinders were ampules. And as each prisoner received his injection, he shuffled woodenly ahead at a word of command to join the growing line who waited in the corridor, motionless and

without any further attention from the busy guards!

Deglen had been watching over Ron's shoulder, and now he whispered the phrase that was echoing in Ron's mind: "Hypnotic serum!"

"So that's how they handle us," Ron muttered, and he understood now why the others had been so discouraged. Once injected with the drug, a man became a living robot, an automaton without any will except to obey blindly a spoken command.

Ron wondered briefly what would happen if he were to shout a command to that waiting group of human robots, but the answer was only too obvious. The blaster of the two armed guards would level their ranks before they could move.

There remained only one prisoner now in the adjoining cell. Ron couldn't see his face in the dim light, but his heart sank with pity as he made out the stooped, gaunt figure of an elderly man. Slowly he shuffled to the gate, while the guards waited impatiently, and then with sudden courage hurled himself at the Jupe with the serum ampules.

The Jupe sidestepped easily, his cohort swung his blaster around with a laugh, and the elderly one collapsed as the harrel crashed viciously against his head. Ron clenched his fists around the bars, hoping the other prisoners would only take advantage of this momentary distraction, and knowing at the same time his hope was futile. The others in the corridor still waited passively, motionless and wooden.

The Jupe with the blaster sighted on the figure at his feet, but the other one stopped him. "Put Grandpa in with these others. We can use him in the next work-party—if he's still alive by then."

The limp, pitiful figure was

dropped inside the gate of Ron's cell; the gate clanged shut again; and then at a command the group outside marched off. Fifty men with only three guards, Ron thought... but *not* men, really. Helpless, will-less automatons, they were—and so would remain until the drug had worn off. And by that time, of course, they would be back in their cell. Providing previous exposure to hot radiations hadn't already finished them off; and then his own group, the newest lot, would take their place.

The old man still lay in a heap on the stone floor, ignored by even his companions-in-distress. Ron cursed, remembering the old fellow's admirable if futile show of resistance, and hurried to his side. Behind him Deglen hesitated long enough to wet his scarf with cold water, and then bathed the wasted, leathery face as Ron supported his head.

The eyes opened, blinked up at Ron, and then he struggled.

"It's all right now, old boy. We're Earthmen, we're your friends."

"Pa—Patterson!" the old fellow gasped.

And Ron knew in the same instant that he was looking down into the lined, suffering face of the man who had once commanded a world... Addison Merlo!

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS SOME time before he could speak more than a few disjointed phrases. Already an old man at the beginning of the orange blight, Merlo had obviously suffered greatly at the hands of the Jupes. But Ron urged him to rest, and forced a thin gruel of concentrate and water between his lips, and at length he was able to sit up.

Merlo's story was short and bit-

ter, much of it as Ron had already gathered. The ex-President had left Capitola with a picked crew in a secret and desperate attempt to trace the Creeping Death to its source. He had suspected, even then, the true nature of the blight; he had guessed that some traitor had sold out to the enemy world...

"We suspected you above all," Merlo told Ron bluntly, but with a trace of humor in his weary, pain-ridden eyes. "I can see now that we must have been wrong. Anyway, we were immediately picked up by a Jupe cruiser and then I knew for sure that we had been betrayed. Supposedly no one, with the exception of my own daughter and Eric Kiger, knew of the flight in advance."

"Kiger was your traitor," Ron said grimly, and sketched briefly what had happened since the President's disappearance, "Having accomplished his job, he was probably supposed to have been rescued by a Jupe patrol. They double-crossed him, or just conveniently forgot him, and then he had to talk me into piloting the K-3 in order to make his escape. But now...well, he's earned his just reward. I saw him die—at Ivar's own command."

"And what of my daughter?" Merlo faltered. "You said she was captured with you? Does she still live?"

Ron hesitated. Having seen the fiendish hypnotic serum at work, he knew now the explanation for Varie Merlo's submission to the Jupe leader's will. But there was no purpose in bringing further distress to this poor old man.

"As far as I know, she's still alive," Ron answered evasively. "We have to find some way of breaking out of here."

Merlo sighed. "Hopeless, Patterson. Even if we did overcome the

guards, we wouldn't get very far. And you saw what happened to my useless attempt."

Ron climbed to his feet slowly, shaking his head. "Not entirely useless, sir. It gave me an idea—and by the gods of space, we're going to make it work!"

BY THE TIME the guards returned, Ron's fellow prisoners had been transformed from a hopeless, defeated lot into an organized, determined group. His plan depended upon split-second timing and the self-discipline of every last man, and at first there had been protests that it would get them nothing but quick death.

"You haven't anything better to look forward too!" Ron reminded them, and then when Addison Merlo himself volunteered for the first and most crucial move, the protests died in shame.

The guards finally put in their appearance, after hours of tense waiting, and took their positions as before with the automatic precision of an old routine.

Addison Merlo was first through the gate this time, and the Jupe with the ampules chuckled harshly as he reached for his arm. "Learned your lesson, eh, old one?"

But Merlo had already stumbled, his arms flailing and sending the tray of hypodermics spilling. Quickly the other guard slammed the gate shut while the first Jupe viciously drove the pointed ampule into his arm and then sent him reeling against the corridor wall. Cursing, both Jupes at the gate then bent to retrieve the tiny cylinders. The flurry had attracted the attention of the third guard, but seeing everything apparently under control he returned to his station on the back side of the pen.

Merlo himself was now under the

drug, but his apparent awkwardness had accomplished its purpose. In the instant before the Jupe had jabbed him, his floundering hands and feet had sent perhaps half a dozen of the ampules rolling back into shadows of the cell, where they had been quickly retrieved and surreptitiously passed from hand to hand.

At least Ron had one concealed in his sweating palm now, and Deglen behind him. The gate was cracked open again, the armed guard beckoned with a wave of his blaster and a curse of warning. Ron stepped through and in one smooth motion swung his left arm out from his side. The ampule jabbed home in the bare leg of the kilted Jupe with the blaster. Simultaneously Deglen, following close on Ron's heels, had shoved his own ampule into the reaching arm of the second Jupe.

For a split second their fate held in the balance. Both Jupes had already reacted to the sudden attack, but the powerful drug took instantaneous effect. The blaster dropped again, their faces stiffened. Ron shoved his now empty ampule into one limp, unresisting hand with a sharp, low command. "Use this for every man! Continue as if nothing had happened."

And with a prayer he marched on through, to take his place woodenly by Addison Merlo. Deglen quickly followed, and behind him the rest of the prisoners one by one. The hand of the drugged Jupe rose and fell in a routine motion, his armed cohort stood by with blaster poised, the prisoners formed their usual docile line down the corridor—and to the third guard all apparently had proceeded as usual.

Ron waited with trembling tension, not daring to look around, knowing that one false move, one indication from any of them that he wasn't

drugged, would spoil the show. Then all were out, and the third guard had stepped up from behind.

"That's the last of 'em," Ron heard him mutter to his colleagues. "What's the matter with you? Let's go!"

His protest died in a gurgle as a dozen of the supposedly drugged prisoners jumped him from behind. A hand cut off his wind, another hand drove the point of an ampule into his back, and then there were three guards at their command.

Ron stepped out of line then, and quickly gave his orders. "Proceed as usual! Answer all challenges as usual. You are escorting a work-party in the usual manner. You are taking us to the airdrome. We have been ordered to clean up the patrol ships which have just returned from duty!"

The guards moved stolidly ahead. Ron surveyed his men with a last warning glance, and then went back into line between Merlo and Deglen. Just as mechanically as their escorts they moved forward, inwardly tense but outwardly just another group of obedient, robot slaves.

THEY WOUND through the dimly-lit underground passageway, passing several guard-posts without a hitch. Obviously of the lowest caste and lowest intelligence, the dungeon guards accepted the situation as normal without a second glance. But as they came out into the glaring brightness at last, Ron knew the crucial moment had come.

Crisp air filled their lungs, around them stretched the city rising like the walls of some enormous stadium. And Ron could hear the mutters in the ranks behind him, feel the rising restlessness. His voice carried hard and clear over his shoulder: "Steady! I'll shoot the first one who gives us away, or tries to make a break for

it!"

They subsided, their marching footsteps beat on in mechanical cadence. The few Jupes on the street passed them without a glance; obviously it was a familiar sight, and the hypnotic drug had never failed.

It hadn't failed now—with those who had been injected. Unquestioningly their doped escorts led them on, winding higher and higher on the terraced streets. Then into the mouth of a huge horizontal shaft leading straight back into the mountainside—and Ron's guess was confirmed. The Jupiter air base was an immense tunnel cut through the enclosing mountain, with the entrance shaft leading in from the city itself and its mouth, undoubtedly, opening on the far side. Thus the ships could take off and land without endangering the metropolis itself or disturbing the protective force-barrier overhead.

But the shaft itself must have some sort of a barrier to close it off, Ron thought, and almost with the thought it came into sight. A huge bulkhead of black metal had been fused across the tunnel. There was a wide door in the middle, but before that entrance was still another sentry post, with half a dozen lounging guards.

Their leading escort halted, and Ron thought that their luck had ended. They were trapped now, and facing six or seven blasters which could cut them down in a twinkling. Almost unbelievably Ron heard their doped guard answering the challenge with a parrot-like repetition of his own words:

"We have been ordered to clean up the patrol ships which have just returned from duty."

The sentry peered at the speaker curiously. "What ails you, Eno? Have these walking dead ones addled your brains?"

"We have been ordered to clean up the patrol ships—"

"All right, all right!" The sentry pulled a lever and stepped aside, with a leer at the blank-faced Earthmen. "We got some hot ones, I warrant you that."

The barrier swung open, the group marched through, and then it clanged shut behind them again. Ron took in the situation at a single glance. No guards in here—the steady blast of a sub-zero wind and the choking fumes of ammonia were explanation enough. Ahead lay the flaring mouth of the gigantic cavern, opening in a half-mile apron to the steel-gray Jupiter sky. And lined up along it, the gleaming black bulls of the Jupiter fleet.

There was no holding the men now, for they knew that they had succeeded. They broke ranks with a shout, splitting into the two groups as previously decided. Each group had an experienced navigator at its head, and members from an Earth patrol crew which the Jupes had taken prisoner as a unit.

Ron paused long enough to seize one of the blasters from the drugged, bewildered guards—and to end their perplexity forever with three short blasts. Then he raced after Deglen, who was already boarding the nearest cruiser.

A glance at the bridge controls and a word from the busy pilot reassured Ron. The set-up was quite similar to that of the old-time Earth spaceships, which one time too had depended upon "hot" atomic drives. Also, the pilot assured him, a briefing in all types of foreign ships had been included in their military instruction.

He found Deglen already at his post before a transmitter in the small radio room off the bridge, and he waited anxiously while the latter puz-

zled out the strange hookup and the unfamiliar dials.

"Okay," Deglen said finally. "I think I've got it."

"You know your orders?" Ron asked him. "Hold it for thirty minutes once you're overheard—and then give it full power if there's the slightest sign of resistance below."

Deglen nodded, but frowned. "You mean you aren't coming with us?"

Ron beld up his captured blaster. "Some unfinished business—including the rest of these cruisers. Somebody's got to take care of them, or you won't get very far."

Deglen nodded slowly, his homely face splitting in a hopeful grin. He had overheard Ron's conversations with Addison Merlo, and apparently had guessed the rest.

"Good luck, fella. When you find that 'unfinished business', you can tell her her father's in the best of hands!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE green-kilted police guards of Jupiter were, as Ron already knew, a slow-moving and dull-witted lot; sad products of the excessive inbreeding among the lower class of the Jupes. And the guard called Aguan—be who watched the single entrance shaft to the Leader's castle crag—had been chosen for brawn and blind loyalty rather than intelligence.

But now, as the first reddish shadows of night-glow crept over the cliff-city below, Aguan's loyalty suffered. He was tired and bored and stiff with cold. He resented the shouts of drunken merriment which echoed from the jutting palace balcony above. So far there had not even been the usual diversion of royal feast nights—the dropping of screaming slave girls from that far-flung parapet toward whimsical tar-

gets a thousand feet below.

Aguan had heard other sounds too, at his lonely post. A while ago the muffled thunder of several departing space cruisers, now and then the sharp sudden hiss of a blaster on the streets below. But none of this was Aguan's concern. His only worry was the arrival of his relief; and he turned now at a movement behind, thinking his man had come. But instead came the brief flare of a blaster...and then Aguan's worries had ended eternally.

But for the Earthman who darted past his shriveled remains, trouble had only begun. Already, Ron knew, the alarm must have spread from his swift encounters on the levels below. And now as he gained the elevator shaft, his ears caught sound of the revelry above. He could guess its meaning—a victory celebration by Ivar and his assembled leaders. And what could one do, armed even with a blaster, against that mob?

But still he pressed the lever that would take him straight up into the stronghold of Jupiter might...

The guard at the top of the shaft looked up listlessly. He was slumped out sprawling against the glittering wall of marcasite tile; obviously some of the festive liquor had found its way down his throat. As his bleary eyes focussed on Ron and at last registered, he tried to rise. But already Ron's hands were at his throat and after a moment of struggle he slumped again.

Cautiously Ron crept through the dusk across the terrace, hugging the inner wall as he worked his way toward the brightly lit, transparent shell of the palace. Hot fury gripped him as he peered in, but cold reason stayed his hand on the blaster trigger. One gun alone could never command that sprawling scene of orgy.

A banquet table had been laid the

enormous length of this central hall. It had once been heaped with steaming platters and brimming bowls, but now one section had been overturned and the rest of it was in shambles. The Jupe war lords were scattered from one end to the other, some sprawled in drunken stupor on the floor, others pursuing their pleasure with screaming, struggling slave girls.

RON SICKENED as he realized that these captives had not been doped, so that their terror and feeble struggles might only add to inhuman sport. Even as he watched in horror, one torn and desperate maiden broke loose from her pursuer and ran through the open panel just beyond Ron. Frantically she dashed along the terrace, seeking a way out as her drunken tormentor followed.

Ron raised his blaster, unable any longer to count the cost, but already it was too late. The Jupe had cornered the girl at the far edge, and in her last desperate attempt to escape his clutching fingers she stumbled backward over the low balustrade. Her scream echoed thinly from below; the Jupe chuckled brutally and turned back in for another; and Ron with an effort slowly lowered the gun in his clenched fist.

With loathing he turned his eyes inside again, seeking a point of attack where he might at least stand a chance. Time was growing short; already he could hear the faint drone of a ship in the distance...

His eyes at last found Ivar, the giant Jupe leader in his gilt-spiralled uniform of symbolic black. Ivar, too, was roaring drunk and likewise having his sport. A slim, white-skinned figure, clad in the revealing slave robe, struggled in his hairy arms. She fought desperately and broke free—only to be seized by other rough hands and tossed back to the center

of the group.

Time and time again she almost got away, but always to be shoved back again with a roar of savage laughter. Ron caught one glimpse of her face, the stricken, lovely face of Varie Merlo. Then his self-control broke, and he started forward. He couldn't hope to get all of them, but Ivar at least would feel the first blast and Varie would have the grim satisfaction of sharing his own quick death.

But as Ron gathered himself at the open entrance, he hesitated again. Apparently Ivar had tired of the sport, or else had been reminded of his duty by the uniformed officer who had just whispered in his ear. He raised his hand now for attention, and the uproar quickly subsided.

"Belay for a moment, my friends! Your leader must toss a bone to his people."

There was a cynical laughter and a few grumbles, but obediently even the drunkenest of the lot staggered to their feet and filed out behind their commander, who was heading straight for the wide entrance where Ron still hesitated!

Ron ducked back hastily, taking shelter again against the shadowed rampart at the rear. Overhead suddenly the arched barrier glowed into light, flooding the entire bowl of the city with an illumination stronger than that of day. Ron shrank back still further, fearing that he would be spotted, but all eyes were on the huge figure of Ivar as he stepped to the edge of the balcony. He began to speak, and as his mighty voice rolled back from the surrounding cliffs Ron realized that some hidden amplifying device was bringing his words to every ear in the city below.

"People of Jupiter! Your Leader speaks!"

BACK CAME the echo of thousands of voices. "Ivar, our Leader! Ivar the Great!" From where he was, Ron could not see over the edge but he could picture the multitude gathering on the winding streets below, like ants pouring from a teeming hill.

"People of Jupiter, we have won the mighty victory I promised you but a short time ago. Earth has fallen, and her allied planets are isolated. The System is ours!"

Back came the dutiful echo, "Ivar our Leader," but it sounded hollow and unenthusiastic to Ron. "So what?" it seemed to ask. "What benefit to us?"

Apparently the war lords sensed this too, for they stirred uneasily and Ivar's harsh voice boomed out again with great promises of their future as the master race.

But Ron, crouching in his corner, no longer listened. Now if ever was his chance, for not only were Ivar's top commanders clustered about him, but even the guards and servants of the palace had gathered to hear their Leader's words.

He could, Ron knew now, destroy that whole evil crew with one quick, steady sweep of his weapon. Except for one thing—and the only reason his finger hesitated on the trigger. Varie Merlo was in the center of that group, held securely by two Jupe officers, her head hanging limp with exhaustion. The other captives had been herded away, and even as Ron wondered for what purpose she had been brought out here, Ivar's gloating conclusion provided the horrible answer.

The Jupe leader turned and seized Varie, shoving her roughly toward the balcony edge before him. He held her there, poised, while his cohorts spread out closer to the edge and his voice carried down to the craning

multitude below.

"Your Leader is grateful, oh people of Jupiter! He gives you our fairest captive—daughter of the once-mighty ruler of Earth itself! Take her—and see for yourselves how our enemies have fallen!"

Cold horror had seized Ron as he realized Ivar's intention of sending Varie hurtling to her death in the depths below. He knew he could never reach her in time, and now heedless fury tightened his trigger finger. The blaster swung, covering the long balcony before him with a sheet of flame that melted all who stood in its path. The first went down without even turning, the last had time only for a scream or a futile step before the arc reached them—until there was only black Ivar himself.

Ron's finger lightened at the last instant as his sights swung to their final target. For Ivar had whirled, pulling back Varie and holding her in front of him in instinctive self-protection.

FOR A second they faced each other, and Ivar read his advantage in Ron's hesitation. He edged toward the exit shaft, still holding Varie as a shield before him. She struggled feebly, but her strength was gone and the Jupe held her slender form as easily as a doll.

"Shoot, Ron!" she gasped, and her voice was a sob.

Ron hurled himself forward, dropping the blaster which could only reach Ivar at the cost of the girl's life. The Jupe hurled her aside too, as he met Ron's lunge. He grinned derisively as he braced himself to grapple, knowing full well that the Earthman would be no match for his massive strength.

But Ron knew it too; knew that only skill and speed could save him. His fists lashed inside the Jupe's

wide-spread arms; a left and a right and then he weaved away again. Ivar shook his bearded head, hardly hurt, and clumsily tried to close again.

But still Ron circled around, landing blow after blow which the Jupe tried awkwardly to guard as he lumbered after his elusive foe.

It was a savage, silent fight to the finish. Neither of them saw Varie as she pulled herself up, stumbled over to Ron's discarded weapon. Ron didn't even hear her frantic cry for him to get out of range; he knew only that hated, massive target and the numb satisfaction of his bleeding fists.

For the Jupe was beginning to tire of a game in which he couldn't even come to grips with his agile opponent. Debauchery had made Ivar soft; his wind was short and the Earthman's blows were beginning to tell. He stumbled angrily forward like a wounded bull, not realizing in his wrath that he was being led always closer to the yawning edge of the terrace itself.

"Now, Ron!" came Varie's scream. "Get back!"

But if Ron heard her at all, her meaning was lost. The lust for blood pounded in his aching body. He saw Ivar with his back to the rail, he pounded in again with the last desperate strength he could muster. The Jupe staggered back against the balustrade, trying to dodge... stumbled blindly, and then went on over as Ron's right fist crashed into his jaw.

Panting and dazed, Ron stared over the edge. Dumbly he watched as Ivar's figure fell twisting through space, a sprawling, falling beetle in the bright glare of the radiant overhead bowl. In a trance of exhaustion his eyes followed it all the way down, until at last it was a tiny blot against one of the shining streets below—and

the center of a converging mob of ant-like figures.

Then he shook himself out of it, at a sudden touch on his arm. He looked around and saw Varie, the blaster still trembling in her hand. He heard the nearing drone of the cruiser circling overhead beyond the lighted barrier, and he knew that there was still much to be done.

"You stand guard," he told the girl, nodding toward the rear of the balcony. "We can hold them off indefinitely, as long as you cover that elevator shaft."

Then, with a wry grin for the fate that had put him in this exalted position, he turned once more toward the waiting, wondering city of Jupiter.

"People of Jupiter!"

HIS WORDS rolled back from the surrounding cliffs, like the mighty voice of a prophet.

"People of Jupiter, an Earthman speaks! Your leader, Ivar, has fallen. You saw him fall, and you can look upon his broken body with joy and without fear. He lies down there in the gutter where he belongs. His war lords lie dead about me, here on the palace balcony. You know the truth of what I say, by the mere fact that I am able to say it."

Behind him, Ron heard the sharp, reassuring spit of the blaster in Varie's hand. He glanced over his shoulder, saw that she was holding her post, and then continued.

"People of Jupiter, your tyrant spoke truly when he said that Earth had fallen. The cities of Earth have been destroyed—by a secret weapon which you yourselves created. But now, unless you choose otherwise, that same weapon can bring you the same misery and destruction. Here somewhere in your city is the laboratory which spawned that weapon.

Overhead you can hear the sound of one of your own cruisers, but one manned by Earthmen. One flick of a switch on that ship will set your own weapon in action against you; one sign of resistance and you all will perish.

"But we do not believe that you want to die. We do not believe that you want war and death and starvation. We need your help and your resources to help restore the mother planet which is home to all of us. I promise you, that with your peaceful cooperation it *can* become your home again.

"We, the men of Earth, have spoken. We can give you peace, and freedom, and justice for all. Or we can give you death, even as your leaders did us. You can believe what I say, by the mere fact that I trouble to say it when your position is helpless...

"Peace or death? The choice is yours!"

Ron waited, and in the waiting silence it seemed he could hear the muted murmur of ten thousand voices whispering in sudden hope.

He spoke again: "If your choice is peace, follow this command. Choose your own delegates. One from each level, high and low alike. Let them come to this fallen throne of tyranny, where henceforth all shall be heard on equal terms."

He leaned over the edge, looking down and across into the sea of uplifted faces. There was still the great, incredulous silence; the wondering unbelief of hopes which have at last been set free.

Then one distant voice was lifted: "Peace... Peace!" And others joined in—and more—until the swelling chant filled the hollow bowl of the city and the echoes reached the sky.

And over it all, one lone Earthman stood looking down, musing the des-

tiny which had fallen to him. Thinking of the task of bringing justice where tyranny had flourished before; thinking of the eternal vigilance needed where treachery had ruled so long. And thinking, too, of the bright

new Earth which could someday rise again from the ruins of the old...

Then he turned to Varie, saw shining in her face the light that would sustain him on the long, dark road ahead.

THE DAY THE BOMB FELL

alizing how full of prophecy the words were. "I reckon this is war, Marianne, like the history books tell about. Only worse."

She nodded. The tank started up with a muted roar and rolled off down the highway after the others.

Johnny watched it go. Looking up, his boyish shoulders straightened.

"Wasn't long ago," he said, "that I was wishin' the school'd burn down—that summer vacation was here." He sighed heavily. "I guess, Marianne," he went on, taking her hand and starting off into the orchard, "maybe vacation has come a little early this year."

THE END

BIG CHRISTMAS OFFER

(This special offer expires JAN. 15th)

(a) Subscribe NOW to all four (4) S F mags for the LOW price of \$10.00 per year (24 issues). SAVE \$4.40 from regular newsstand price of \$14.40.

**AMAZING S F STORIES
FANTASTIC**

**THRILLING SCIENCE FICTION
S F ADVENTURE CLASSICS**

(b) Subscribe for TWO YEARS (48 issues) for the LOW price of \$19.00. Save \$9.80 from the regular newsstand price of \$28.80.

(c) Subscribe to the NEW and MOST EXCITING S F magazines, *AMAZING* and *FANTASTIC*, for 1 year (12 issues) for \$5.50 (regular newsstand price of \$7.20) and 2 years (24 issues) \$10.50 (regular newsstand price of \$14.40).

(d) Subscribe to *THRILLING S F* and *S F ADVENTURE CLASSICS* for 1 year: \$5.25 (12 issues, regular newsstand price of \$7.20) and 2 years (24 issues) \$10.00 (regular newsstand price, \$14.40).

Enter my subscription for:

A. _____ B. _____ C. _____ D. _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

(add \$1.00 per year for Canada and Pan American countries; and \$1.00 per year for all other foreign orders)

Mail to: ULTIMATE PUB. CO., Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364

EXCITING STORIES IN STRANGE WORLDS

LET FREEDOM RING

by Fritz Leiber

THE WORLD OF WHISPERING WINGS

by Rog Phillips

NO MEDAL FOR CAPTAIN MANNING

by William P. Mc Givern

THE DAY THE BOMB FELL

by Leslie A. Croutch

INVADERS FROM THE VOID

by Russell Branch

